The MecDec at 250 p. 20

Off-Road Ozarks Adventure p. 25

DEI on Tap p. 43

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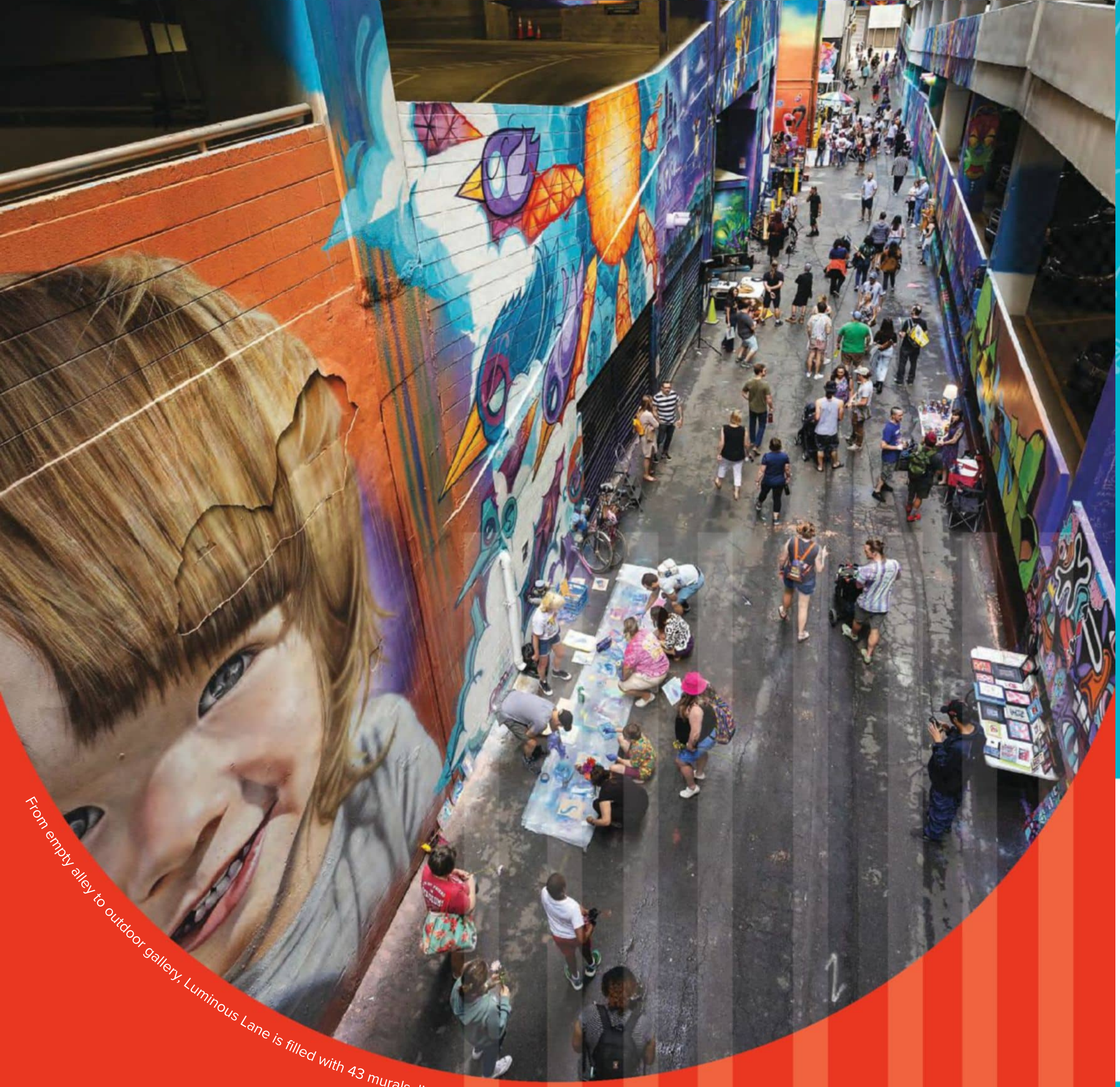

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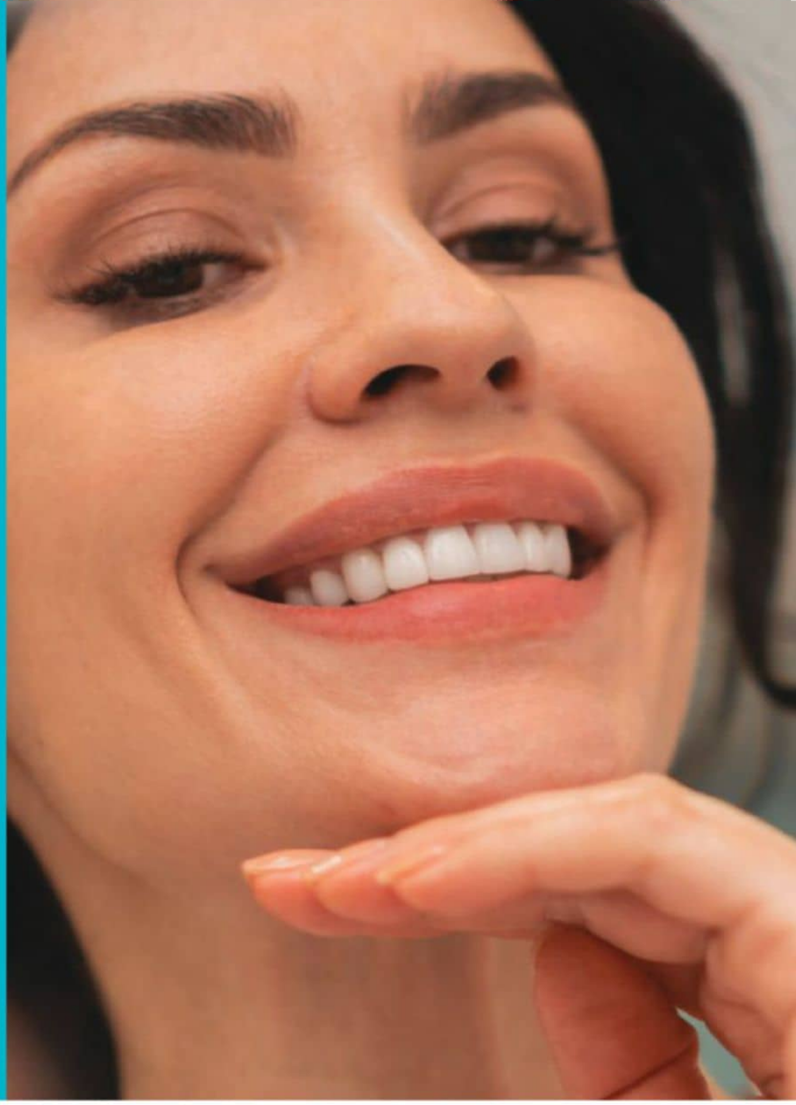

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Our annual compilation of the city's best food, drink, entertainment, experiences, and retail
BY TESS ALLEN, TAYLOR BOWLER, GAVIN EDWARDS, AMANDA PAGLIARINI HOWARD, GREG LACOUR, AND KAYLEIGH RULLER

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Charlotte's booming escape room scene mixes puzzles, theatrical sets, and time pressure. We went inside the labyrinth
BY GAVIN EDWARDS

ON THE COVER: Best of the Best winner Noelle Muñoz models her silver jewelry. Photograph by Rusty Williams.

ON THIS PAGE: It's not Area 51 but an area—OK, room—called 51 at Timed Out Escape, where guests try to solve life-size puzzles. Photograph by Herman Nicholson.

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LOGAN CYRUS; LAUREN VIED ALLEN; COURTESY; BIG CEDAR LODGE; PETER TAYLOR

FROM THE EDITOR

SO MUCH BEST

We keep expecting the superlatives to run dry.
They never do

OUR STAFF GATHERS to discuss the Best of the Best around late January. Every year, it's a similar scene, something akin to our school days, when we had term papers to write and stared for hours at blank screens. The Google Sheet yawns open like the Grand Canyon, and we have to fill it with our staff choices. What are the Best of the Best in food, drink, shopping, etc.? And how can we keep from repeating ourselves? It seems impossible.

Then someone has a suggestion. That touches off another, then another. Before long, our Google Sheet overfloweth. Then we discuss what to cut. That's painful. By now, we've emotionally invested in our favorites: No, we have to keep our choice for best sauteed squash! The discussion resumes. But, hey, at least we have something on the page.

We always do because Charlotte always does. I don't know why we stress out about picking the BOBs, as we call them. They're like overripe fruit that fall out of the trees. In this issue, we present to you color-coded dumplings, Stetson hats, spell-casting herbs, a coffee shop owner who hands patrons little plastic ducks just 'cause, a dive bar that serves cookies, and ... oh, just plunge into the list (p. 66). We suffered for it.

While you're on your happy way from one BOB selection to another, maybe take a second or so to reflect on what Charlotte is and how far it's come. Can you believe this was once a city where you couldn't order a cocktail? Feast your eyes on the buzz-acquisition options before you: a galaxy of beers, pickle-brine mixed drinks, even THC seltzers and cannabis consumption lounges. (I'd love to go back in time to the Charlotte of the PTL Ministries, "Just Say No" 1980s and tell them about Happy Camper. That's right, Jim and Tammy Faye, you can head down to vibrant North Davidson Street and get, ahem, baked.)

Even outside the expansive BOBs, you discover new realms that make you cock your head like a curious terrier. I'd never heard of escape rooms until Contributing Editor Gavin Edwards pitched a feature story some months back. I responded (paraphrasing): "Well, Gavin, I haven't the slightest idea what those are. Sounds fascinating. Write it up."

Check out "Pure Escapism" (p. 56) for a glimpse into the world of escape rooms, a fanciful blend of problem-solving and fantasy that's blossomed in the past decade, often semi-cognito in warehouses or corporate parks. You have to look for them, in other words. So many valuable things in this city are like that.

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LOGAN CYRUS

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ONLINE EXTRAS, EVENTS, AND CONVERSATIONS

Return of the Matt

MATT CROSSMAN was a regular contributor to this magazine from 2008 to 2016, when he and his family moved to St. Louis. During his time in Charlotte, the former *Sporting News* staffer penned a number of memorable pieces, including an oral history of the 1988-89 Charlotte Hornets ("'The Place Went Nuts,'" November 2013 issue) and a first-person account of his drive around the "67 glorious miles" of a finally completed Interstate 485 in 2015. We didn't hear from Matt for a while. Then he re-emerged with a pitch: a London travel piece that focused on places known to our city's namesake ("Queen Charlotte's London," February 2024 issue). This month, he serves up another travel story, this one about Branson, Missouri (p. 25). Nice to see you again, Matt. —*Greg Lacour*

***CHARLOTTE* MAGAZINE:** It's been a while since you roamed the streets and newly opened interstates of Charlotte. What have you been up to all these years?
MATT CROSSMAN: Same thing I was doing in Charlotte—chasing stories and adventure (in that order). The biggest difference is how much taller my daughters (now 18 and 15) are.

CM: Why'd you want to write about Branson?
MC: I want people to go have fun there like I have. It's almost like I didn't realize just how much there is to do until I started writing this piece. There's great golf and fishing and an excellent amusement park, and it's not terribly expensive to get there or be there.

CM: Do you miss anything about Charlotte, and what's it been like to watch it from afar as it continues to grow?

Crossman

MC: Before I moved there in 2008, I visited often for work, and I thought it would be a great place to live. I even, sometimes, imagined what it would be like. Then work forced me to move there, and it was just as wonderful as I daydreamed it would be.

Life situations prompted us to move again, and now I tell people that if I could take my friends in St. Louis and move them to Charlotte, I would do that in a minute. I miss the weather and the people and the food—Bobbee O's (BBQ), Mert's Heart & Soul, and 300 East specifically—and the vibe of living in a city that is constantly changing. I miss getting together with the Charlotte writing community to solve the world's problems and exhaust a bar's waitstaff.

REACT

Responses to *Charlotte* magazine's March issue:

To "Blue Door," p. 38
We were fortunate to stumble in on opening weekend. Hands down one of the best cocktail bars in Charlotte!
Facebook comment from Ashley Craig

Best cocktail menu in Charlotte! Love it!!
Instagram comment from @cltmermaid

To "Music to Our Ears," p. 66
@ampballantyne i think could help allure some more 'indie/alt' acts who skip CLT for Raleigh/Asheville/Atlanta. We're getting the major pop stops though.
Instagram comment from @adamrothnc

They still pass up Charlotte. Maybe not as much as before but they still do more than most other US cities
Instagram comment from @jtothedub10

Wish there would have been more from Michael Venutolo-Mantovani. The fact he referenced Carrboro and radius clauses shows he knows what's up.
Instagram comment from @tbrqc

I've noticed that with @ampballantyne and @carolinatheatreclt bigger acts are booking. I still refuse to go to @pncmusicpav it's an absolute dump and needs to be razed. A city this size needs a top tier large amphitheater.
*Instagram comment from @nopenopenope1_*
@nopenopenope1_ I refuse to go to PNC unless it's a band I would travel to another city to see. Just not worth the traffic. Especially for weeknight shows...
Instagram reply from @jgobbell

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THE BUZZ
WHAT MATTERS NOW IN THE CITY

LIFE LESSONS

ANNA JULIAN LUCKE

The American Airlines pilot has endured a few bumpy rides to achieve what few women in aviation have

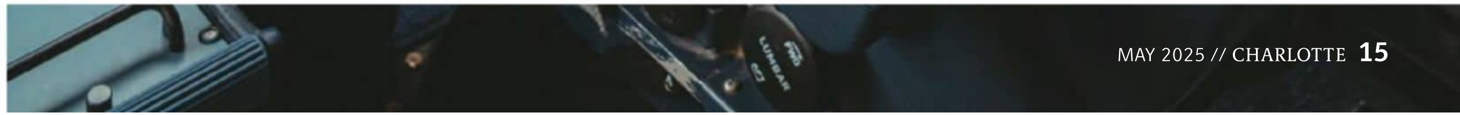
BY TAYLOR BOWLER

PHOTOGRAPHS BY LOGAN CYRUS

ANNA JULIAN LUCKE doesn't have a professional headshot or corporate profile, and her digital footprint is miniscule. She's exceedingly modest about her chosen profession, but when most people learn what she does for a living, the response is generally something to the effect of, "That is *so* cool."

Lucke (pronounced "LUKE-ee"), 47, is a first officer for American Airlines. It's even cooler when you consider

Continued on next page ➔



this: Women make up just 5% of the world's airline pilots. That percentage is growing—the number of female pilots in the U.S. has doubled in the last decade—but gender equality among flight deck crew members, the highest-paid positions in aviation, is still low compared to other male-dominated fields like science, technology, and engineering.

Growing up in Salisbury, Lucke never gave that much thought. Her mom was a flight attendant, and her stepdad was a pilot, so air travel was usually front of mind. "Their schedules were great," Lucke says. "When you're working, you're working. But when you're off, you're off. My stepdad wasn't going to meetings or jumping on calls. He was just flying somewhere, walking around, having great food, and coming home. There was so much freedom in that."

As a biology major at UNC Chapel Hill, Lucke continued to feel the pull toward aviation and decided to take flying lessons her junior year. She was hooked. She completed her degree, then enrolled at the North American Institute of Aviation in Conway, South Carolina. She was scheduled to take her instrument check ride, a standard flight test administered by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), on Sept. 11, 2001—but all air travel came to a halt. "The era of flying changed after 9/11," she says. "The whole industry slept for a little bit so it could get its bearings."

Lucke eventually passed the test and spent the early 2000s flying for regional airlines, working her way up the chain of command. She was often mistaken for a flight attendant and rarely flew alongside another woman. But she claimed her space on the flight deck and kept her focus on becoming a captain.

In 2008, Lucke took a job with US Airways, which had twice filed for bankruptcy in the wake of 9/11 and was on the verge of financial collapse. A few months later, she was furloughed. Lucke had to put her aviation dreams on hold, find a sales job, and start at the bottom. Two years later, US Airways merged with American Airlines and hired her back. Since then, she says, it's been "a normal trajectory."

Today, she and her husband, Pat, are parents to a 13-year-old daughter, Harper, and 11-year-old son, Jack. Pat is a pilot for Delta, so most weeks are a balancing act with their flight schedules. It's why Lucke has opted not to upgrade to captain for now—but the position is within reach. "There's no way any other career would have brought all of these experiences to me," she says. "I had no idea what was ahead of me for 10 years. So 'keep going' had to be said a lot. But I have no regrets whatsoever. That's a huge thing to be able to say."

Here's Lucke in her own words, edited for length and clarity.

I WAS A VERY GREGARIOUS, go-get-'em-type child. I was a great student and an athlete, so my parents had no reason to meddle. I always craved independence, and they nurtured that. I never felt any limitations—and that's been a big part of flying. Why *not* me?

> "The era of flying changed after 9/11. The whole industry slept for a little bit so it could get its bearings."

MY STEPDAD WAS A PILOT for Piedmont Airlines, then US Airways, which is now American Airlines. My mom met him as a flight attendant. So we traveled a lot. It was such a real, palpable excitement for me every time I traveled.

IN HIGH SCHOOL, I was moving toward the medical profession, thinking I'd be a doctor. So often, you land on something that sounds good, but there wasn't a lot of introspection on my part, so I just continued on that journey.

I WAS A BIOLOGY MAJOR at Chapel Hill, so I was going down the science path, then I moved to pre-dental. I started taking dental-prep courses and was doing observations with local dentists. At the same time, my stepdad was based in Charlotte, so he would fly overseas, spend a day there, and fly back. That was his whole week. As I'm seeing that, I thought, *That's really cool. Let's just see what would happen if I veered off this path.*

DURING MY JUNIOR YEAR of college, I took some flying lessons in Chapel Hill. And it was a feeling. But by then, I'd already done so much of the biology major, so I completed it. And it did help me. I learned how to think and analyze.

I STARTED FLIGHT SCHOOL in 2000 in Conway, South Carolina. It took me about a year to get all of my ratings and certificates. I was scheduled to take a flight instructor instrument check ride on 9/11, which basically allows you to fly around in the clouds and teach other pilots. So that got canceled, and we were shut down for a week. It was like COVID—it changed everything. Eventually I took that check ride, but they weren't going to need that many people to teach, so I was fortunate to get one of those slots. I did that for three years.

IN 2004, I got my first job in Nashville. Then within a year, I got another job in Houston flying regional, 50- to 75-seat jets. In 2007, I was interviewing at US Airways—and I had no support on that. A lot of people said, "What are you doing? They're about to go under." But I got one piece of advice early on, which was always take your first major airline offer.

IN 2008, I was hired at US Airways. Shortly after that, fuel prices went bananas, and the FAA lifted the age restriction on pilot retirement from 60 to 65 because they saw a possible shortage. So they really didn't need me. I saw the furlough coming.

MY HUSBAND was at Northwest (Airlines) at the time. Fortunately, Delta swooped in, and they merged, so he kept his job while I was furloughed. There were a lot of sleepless nights that year. I had developed an identity as a pilot at that point. Now I'm looking around thinking, *Did I make the wrong decision?*

Continued on page 18 →

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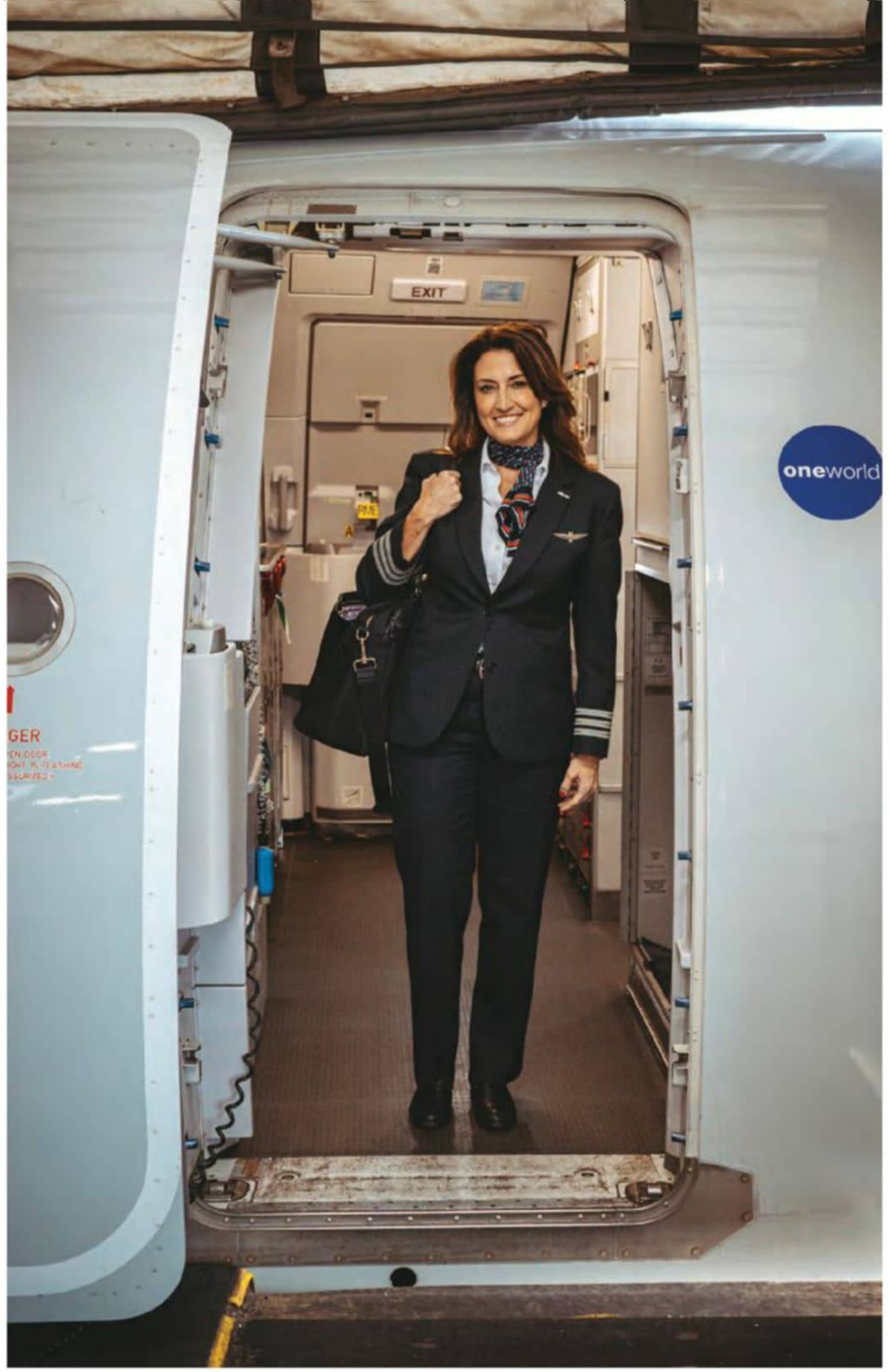
I WAS REALLY DOUBTING myself. But I had a great degree from a great school, so I thought, *I'll just get a job in medical sales.* Except nobody was calling me (laughs). So maybe that was too ambitious. I thought, *I'll do pharmaceutical sales.* Same thing. Crickets. I was talking to a headhunter, and she said, "If you can sell copiers and cars, you can sell anything." So I got a job with Toshiba selling copiers. I swallowed my pride and started at the bottom. I still shudder a little bit when I drive by the offices I had to cold-call.

ONCE I GOT SOME SALES EXPERIENCE, another friend connected me with a wine sales job, so I sold wine to restaurants uptown. That was a lot more fun, and I learned so much about wine. Travel and restaurants all go together, so that was right up my alley. Then US Airways started calling people back. I went back in 2010.

WITH MY SCIENCE BACKGROUND, I find a lot of similarities between the human body and the airplane. When you're talking fuel or hydraulics, it's like the cellular systems that create organs in the body. I had to learn mechanics in a way I never had before. Airplanes all seem to get faster as you progress in this career. Managing that speed as you come in to land is a learning curve.

I HAD AN ENGINE FAILURE a few years ago. I was somewhere over Pittsburgh, flying to Charlotte. We were just flying along, fat, dumb, and happy, then, *bam*! The nose veered, and the engine was gone. Our engine has good systems, and it's recoverable, so you shouldn't have to do much work. But that wasn't happening. We weren't getting it back. We had to land in Pittsburgh with one engine. There's the startle factor, then you go right into the procedures you know. That's never happened since. The things that are scariest are the things we can't control, like the weather or something like 9/11. It's anything that doesn't have to do with the airplane.

THERE ARE PILOTS I've worked with who, if they could say it out loud, they'd say I got the job because I'm female. When I fly with men closer to my age, there's less of that. I think about some of the real pioneers in the '70s and what that must have been like. A lot of accidents were happening because people weren't speaking up. What the captain said went. Luckily, that's changed.



"I do a lot of island turns," Lucke says. "I flew to Punta Cana and back on Monday. Friday it was St. Croix. But it's not as glamorous as it sounds. You're always trying to get your head right with the time change."

THERE'S A LOT OF FOCUS on communication in the cockpit. My feedback when I'm in training is I'm good at communication, and I think that's true with a lot of females. Women are great communicators. I'm not afraid to tell somebody if I think something's not going the way it should. We all make mistakes, so it's important to be able to say, "Hey, I don't think you meant to do that."

FOR YEARS, I was mistaken for a flight attendant. It still happens sometimes. I can count on two hands the amount of other female pilots I've flown with in my 20-year career. One of my mentors I was flying with once had recently gotten a job as a chief pilot here in Charlotte. Her male counterpart was going on and on about how she only got it because she was a woman. I was really mad about that.

THE PILOTS' ROLES change every flight, so if the captain flies down, I fly back. The pilot who's monitoring sees 70% more than the person flying the plane. We have to be really aware of how we talk to each other and how we organize a situation if something comes up.

YOUR DATE OF HIRE is everything in aviation—it's all about seniority. You can grease every landing ever, and it doesn't matter. They're not going to give you a raise for that. That's what we're supposed to do. My husband always says it's luck and timing. If I stay (with American Airlines) until I'm 65, I'll be No. 10 out of 15,000 pilots. That'll be pretty amazing.

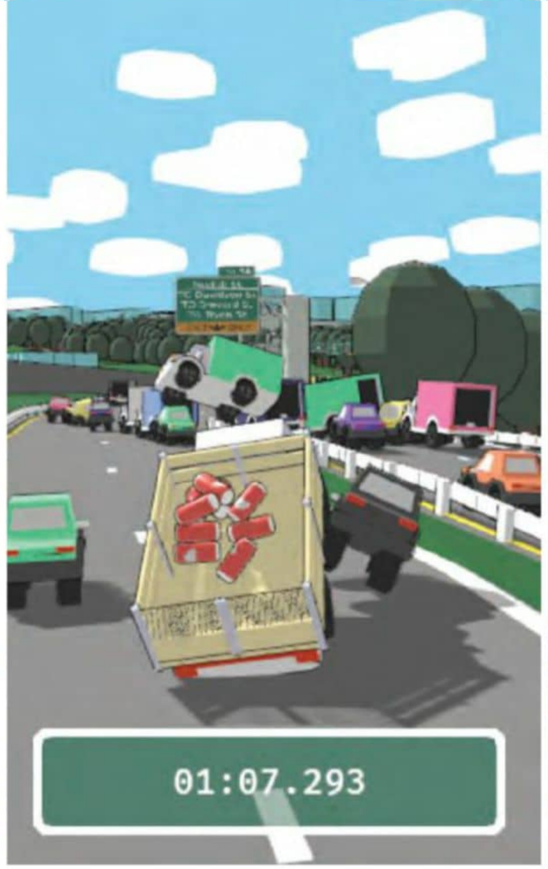
I'M CURRENTLY a first officer. I was able to upgrade to domestic captain years ago, but I chose not to because of the kids. I typically travel 11 days a month. I still remember how hard it was when my mom left, so I was very sensitive to that with my kids. I knew it would sting when they were young. It's another reason I've held off on captain.

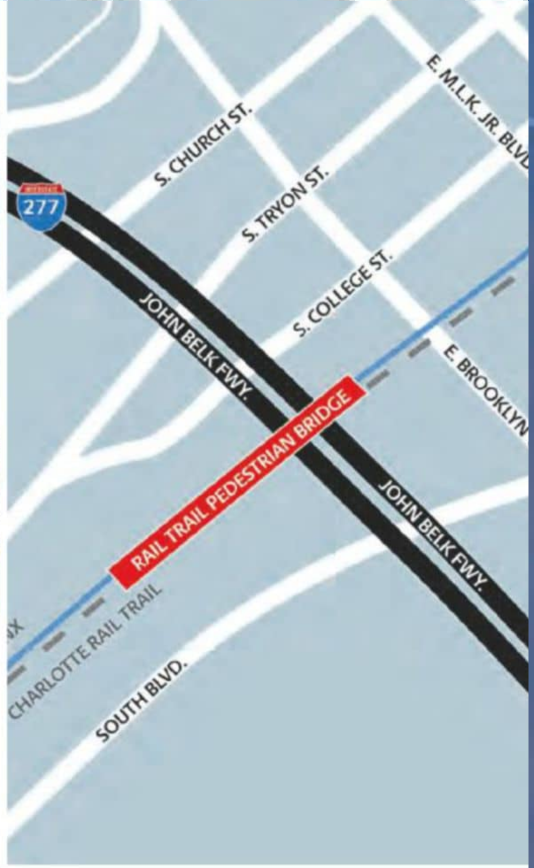
THE OLDER THEY GET, the more my kids are aware of the gender thing. Since both of their parents are pilots, it was nothing to them when they were little. Now they have a greater appreciation for it.

THE TRIPS we get to take are priceless. (My kids) have a lot of stamps on their passports. My daughter has traveled enough now that she can plan a vacation and pick out the Airbnbs, and she's amazing at subway systems. She did it in London last year. That's so cool to see.

IF I COULD SAY ONE THING to my 20-something self? Follow the dream. Jump. It's been a journey, and I'm always pinching myself. When I'm working, I'm all in, but as soon as I walk off that airplane, that's it. That's my life. I'm so grateful that those other jobs allowed me to see that. ■

TAYLOR BOWLER is the lifestyle editor.





COMMUNITY

A DECLARATION, AN ABOMINATION, AN INNOVATION

Inside the MecDec celebration, the Exit 3A video game, and (finally) the Rail Trail bridge

BY TESS ALLEN AND GREG LACOUR

SOMETIMES, the present reflects the past and future, too. Here's a sampling of events, a planned project, and a video game (really!) that touch on what our city's been and what it aims to be.

THE SEMIQUINCENTENNIAL

THAT MEANS "250th anniversary," which in this case applies to the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence, or "MecDec." Members of The May 20th Society, a group of local MecDec enthusiasts, have planned events from May 10-20.

"This 250th anniversary is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to reflect on the courage and vision of the Mecklenburg patriots," says May 20th Society co-founder Scott Syfert. "Charlotte's rich revolutionary history is an integral part of the American story, and we invite the community to take part in these meaningful, educational, and fun events leading up to the commemoration."

Newcomers, and even some longtime Charlotteans, may not grasp the importance of the MecDec. Is it a serious historic artifact, a genuine precursor to the actual Declaration of Independence, or just a local curiosity? Well, it's both—the second and third presidents of the United States, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, both made note of it, although Jefferson was considerably more skeptical about its significance.

On May 19, 1775, a man on horseback rode up to the old log courthouse at the intersection of two old trading routes, now known as Trade and Tryon streets. The man announced that, exactly a month before, colonial militia had defeated British soldiers at Lexington and Concord, and the American Revolution was underway. The feisty militia in the nascent city of Charlotte responded the next day with a proclamation, read from the courthouse steps, that cast off allegiance to the British crown—more than a year before that other Declaration.

Here are the planned events to commemorate the occasion:

SATURDAY, MAY 10:

TRAIL OF HISTORY FESTIVAL
10 a.m.-4 p.m., Captain Jack statue at Fourth Street and Kings Drive. Free celebration with local history, art, music, and food.

MECDEC EXPRESS: A BUS TOUR THROUGH CHARLOTTE'S REVOLUTION
3 p.m., Lost Worlds Brewing Charlotte. Davidson resident David Fleming, author of the 2023 book, *Who's Your Founding Father? One Man's Epic Quest to Uncover the First, True Declaration of Independence*, guides a charter bus tour of MecDec-related sites.

Tickets are $35, $55 with a signed paperback copy.

Continued on page 22 ➔

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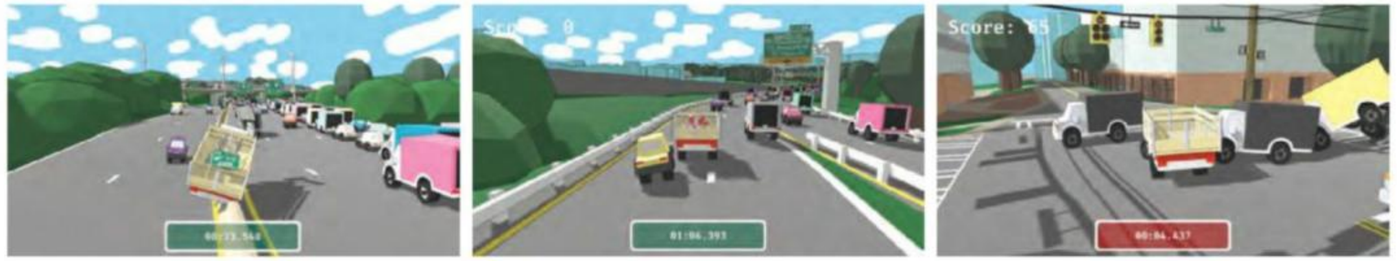

Scenes from software engineer Mike Ramirez's video game based on the notorious Exit 3A.

COURTESY, MIKE RAMIREZ

SUNDAY, MAY 18:

CAPTAIN JAMES JACK HISTORICAL BIKE RIDE
3-6 p.m., begins and ends at Olde Mecklenburg Brewery. The group bike ride visits historic sites in honor of James Jack, who rode his horse to Philadelphia in the summer of 1775 to deliver the MecDec to the Continental Congress. Free.

TUESDAY, MAY 20:

CHARLOTTE MUSEUM OF HISTORY EXHIBIT OPENING
11 a.m.-5 p.m. The exhibit, on display through 2025, begins with the MecDec and explores the concept of freedom through history to the present day. Museum admission ($15 for adults, free for ages 18 and younger) required.

COMMEMORATION CEREMONY
12 p.m., Independence Square, Trade and Tryon streets. The free capstone event, hosted by Charlotte Center City Partners, includes a reading of the declaration, keynote speakers, a wreath-laying ceremony, military salutes, and performances by local musicians and choirs. Special guests include descendants of original signers and civic leaders. *—Greg Lacour*

THE VIDEO GAME

WHEN CHARLOTTE software engineer Mike Ramirez joked with some friends that he was going to make a video game about notorious Exit 3A on Interstate 277, they were so enthusiastic that he got to work. "When I'm driving through Exit 3A and merging across all that traffic," Ramirez says, "I sit up in my seat, and I'm like, 'Alright, I need to make sure I'm hitting all the points to successfully get through the exit.' It feels kind of like a game already."

He's an engineer for a health care company by day, and he's created about a dozen video games for fun since he taught himself to code a decade ago. He started work on "Exit 3A: The Game" in February 2024 and has made it his New Year's resolution to complete it sometime this year. Like a Charlotte-centric game of Frogger, the objective is to navigate a vehicle off I-277 and across three lanes of traffic without spilling your cargo or crashing.

Ramirez plans to release it on the PC gaming platform Steam. He's also working with Zach Pulliam, owner of Super Abari Game Bar, to make it an arcade game. "I have so many ideas now," Ramirez says. You can follow his progress on Instagram at @exit3a_thegame. *—Tess Allen*

THE BRIDGE

ON THE OTHER SIDE of the I-277 loop from Exit 3A, between South Boulevard and College Street, is the site of a planned bridge that's more than just a piece of infrastructure. Local officials hope the bridge can join two areas that the highway has separated for decades: uptown and South End.

In January, City Council members approved a $16.3 million contract for the construction of the Rail Trail Pedestrian Bridge, expected to be finished in spring 2028. It's a long-discussed project that will allow foot and bicycle traffic to cross 277 and freely move between Charlotte's business district and its booming nightlife and residential hub, enhancing both.

That's the hope, anyway. "It's going to become a commuting artery into our major employment center," says Michael Smith, president and CEO of Charlotte Center City Partners, the organization that focuses on economic and neighborhood development in uptown and its neighboring areas. "It's just important on so many levels, and it'll be interesting to see the way it impacts the vibrancy of both districts and so many small and large businesses."

The idea emerged years ago. In 2019, Center City Partners announced that it had secured enough money from public and private sources to build the bridge. The Rail Trail, which opened in 2007, is a 3.5-mile pedestrian walkway that hugs the light rail line through South End—but ends just before I-277. If you want to walk or ride your bike across the interstate, you have to share an overpass with cars.

The 280-foot-long, 16-foot-wide bridge may also represent the first of a series of projects that mitigate the isolating effects of 277—an urban interstate loop that reflects the thinking of planners in the 1960s and '70s who thought cities' future belonged exclusively to the automobile. Only in recent years have local officials throughout the country recognized the benefits of other kinds of transportation in cities.

"More connectivity is better," Smith says. "It connects people with opportunities and creates safer, more pedestrian-oriented neighborhoods. There are other places throughout uptown that would benefit from connections like this."

COVID, of course, delayed the project, in addition to inflation that bumped the estimated project cost from $11 million in 2019 to its current $16.3 million. "Public projects are difficult, particularly when you go across an active expressway that's owned by another form of government," he says. "This is an important project, and that's why everybody has stuck to it, and it's also gone through an incredible inflationary period that makes it hard to keep projects capitalized. I couldn't be more grateful to the city of Charlotte for the way they saw the importance of this connection and stuck with it." *—G.L.* ♛

TESS ALLEN is the associate editor. GREG LACOUR is the editor.

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This lock-and-leave home has been crafted for effortless living, with hardwood floors flowing smoothly through each room, radiating warmth and elegance. The gourmet kitchen features high-end Sub-Zero and Wolf appliances, custom cabinetry, and a sleek tile backsplash. Step outside to explore two covered outdoor living spaces, including a back porch outfitted with a cozy fireplace—perfect for unwinding in your private green retreat. The meticulously landscaped yard is fully managed by the HOA, freeing you to enjoy your home without the hassle of upkeep.

The attached two-car garage offers ample room for vehicles, with the added perk of being within walking distance to SouthPark's nearby amenities. Ideal for those seeking a maintenance-free lifestyle, this home has been designed with attention to every detail, ensuring both comfort and style. Don't miss your chance to claim a piece of luxury in one of SouthPark's most coveted neighborhoods, where exquisite finishes, expansive living spaces, and peaceful surroundings await.

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COURTESY, SILVER DOLLAR CITY PARKS & RESORTS

TRAVEL

Bright Lights, Small City

Whether it's roller coasters, Christmas decorations, billboard promotions, or off-road adventures, Branson does everything over the top

BY MATT CROSSMAN

ONE OF MY KIDS likes fast roller coasters, and the other doesn't (yet). Both have fun when we visit Silver Dollar City in Branson, Missouri. My older daughter adds one, and only one, big coaster every time we go there. I think of our trips there as pencil lines on a door frame—only they represent chutzpah instead of vertical growth. She may be playing a long con and holding off on other rides just to force me to take her back, again and again. If so, I'm playing a reverse long

Continued on next page ➔

The Cathedral Room at limestone Marvel Cave (above), Branson's first tourist attraction, which opened in 1894. The Shepherd of the Hills Outdoor Drama (below) reenacts the 1907 Harold Bell Wright novel of the same name.

con by letting her con me. I love Silver Dollar City, and I'd keep taking her even if she never got off the kiddie rides.

Silver Dollar City, an 1880s-themed amusement park, lacks the name recognition of Disney World and Six Flags, but it's better than both—in rides, food, entertainment, over-the-top-ness, everything. Outlaw Run, one of the fastest wooden coasters in the world, starts with a 162-foot, 81-degree drop, maxes out at 68 mph, and clocks in at 1 minute, 27 seconds of pure adrenaline. The cars in Time Traveler spin as they turn you upside down three times at 50 mph. Powder Keg shoots you from zero to 53 mph in 2.8 seconds and eventually reaches 64 with negative Gs.

If you think the rides are excessive, you should see the midway—especially in winter, when more than 6.5 million Christmas lights shine on 680 miles of string and illuminate 1,000 Christmas trees, 600 wreaths, and more than three miles of garland and ribbon. Subtle this place is not.

Branson's history starts with a hole in the ground—the Marvel Cave. It opened to tourists in 1894, and in the 1950s, the Herschend family built Silver Dollar City on top of it to give customers something to do before their descent. Soon, the village, with a blacksmith, general store, and street theater, was more popular than the cave. As the legend goes, owners gave out silver dollars to customers, thinking they'd take the coins home, spend them, and talk about where they got them. You can still visit the cave, but now the "village" is a theme park.

COURTESY, SILVER DOLLAR CITY PARKS & RESORTS

Around the same time Silver Dollar City opened, local families began to establish theaters and produce shows in Branson. The earliest were country music variety shows and productions of Harold Bell Wright's 1907 novel, *The Shepherd of the Hills*, set in Branson. Eventually, the theaters began to draw national acts, including Andy Williams, the Osmond Brothers, Yakov Smirnoff, and The Oak Ridge Boys.

Branson announces itself long before you arrive, perhaps because the town of about 13,000 senses it needs to. It's in the Ozarks, in an isolated corner of southwest Missouri; the nearest big cities—Tulsa, Oklahoma; Kansas City, Missouri; and Little Rock, Arkansas—are all three-plus hours away. U.S. Highway 65 takes you 50 miles from Springfield-Branson National Airport to Branson, and the roadside bombards you with approximately 75 million billboards that advertise the town's attractions. (As if you'd have another reason to drive south on 65 toward Branson.) Based solely on the drive, here's what a newcomer might expect: a tribute band for every popular musician from Elvis on; enough magicians that guests get assigned one when they check into their hotels; and Dolly Parton herself on hand at any of the multiple self-proclaimed Branson welcome centers.

That said—and this will sound weird—Branson shares attributes with Charlotte.

Branson, geographically and culturally, incorporates several regions of the country, so it's a salad of accents: As in Charlotte, you often hear flat Midwestern, nasal Northeastern, and drawling Southern in the same conversation. Both offer

Continued on page 28 ➔

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Big Cedar Lodge (above), one of the country's top outdoor-themed resorts, offers spectacular views of Table Rock Lake and the Ozarks' rolling terrain.

Not far from Branson are Wonders of Wildlife National Museum & Aquarium (left) in Springfield, the state capital; and Dogwood Canyon Nature Park (above) in Lampe.

COURTESY, BIG CEDAR LODGE; VISIT SPRINGFIELD, MO; EXPLORE BRANSON

plenty of opportunities for outdoor recreation, including top-notch golf courses. And, even though Branson manifests it in a different way, you can't miss the faith life here—in the shows, in the culturally conservative ethic, in how crazy Silver Dollar City goes for Christmas—even amid the hokey schtick.

But the similarities go only so far. Charlotte is a shiny New South city built on banking and endless new homes for all the people who move here. Branson is like Hooters found God and became a city.

PLAY

I love honest guides. My fishing guide, Jim, shrugged when, at first, I got skunked trying to pull trout out of the streams at 10,000-acre **DOGWOOD CANYON NATURE PARK**. Eventually I landed several big rainbows, and Jim shrugged again. He couldn't explain either outcome and didn't try to BS me that he could. Dogwood Canyon is worth a visit even if the fish aren't biting: You can also hike, bike, and ride horses.

TABLE ROCK LAKE, created by a dam on the White River, is popular for small and largemouth bass—and for just hanging out. It also offers pontoon boating, water skiing, and swimming.

To avoid the water (you hope), you can ply a pair of popular and first-rate golf courses nearby. **PAYNE'S VALLEY GOLF COURSE** is named for Payne Stewart, the late World Golf Hall of Fame member and an Ozarks native. The course was designed by Tiger Woods' firm, TGR Design. **OZARKS NATIONAL** meanders over more than 7,000 yards of rolling terrain.

WONDERS OF WILDLIFE NATIONAL MUSEUM & AQUARIUM in Springfield, 45 miles north, hosts more than 800 species of wildlife, 35,000 animals, and a 1.5 million-gallon aquarium spread across 350,000 square feet.

Continued on page 30 ➔

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Chateau on the Lake Resort Spa & Convention Center (above left) overlooks Table Rock Lake. Big Cedar Lodge offers private cabins (above right) along with lakeside cottages, lodge rooms, and other accommodations. The Devil's Pool restaurant at Big Cedar Lodge serves Rockbridge Rainbow Trout (below) with vegetables, rice, and a brown-butter caper sauce.

STAY

Branson has a range of places to stay, from campgrounds to cheap motels to luxurious resorts. **BIG CEDAR LODGE**, owned by Bass Pro Shops founder Johnny Morris, is renowned as one of the top outdoor-themed resorts in the country. When I visit, I stay in a 675-square-foot cabin with a walk-in shower, a couch I need a crane to get out of, and a beautiful view of the rolling, wooded hills of southwest Missouri.

If you visit Branson with a group, check out the lodges, villas, and other accommodations at **WATERMILL COVE RESORT**. They're close enough to Silver Dollar City to zip back and forth and big enough to give you space after spending all day together.

If it's just your family, check out **CHATEAU ON THE LAKE**. My uncommonly dark and quiet room yielded extraordinary nights of sleep even with two kids whacked out on amusement park adrenaline in the same room. Table Rock Lake unfolds below you, its watery fingers flicking into hilly Ozark forests, creating crevices to explore.

EAT

The stone hearth, metal chandeliers, and various animal heads on the walls give **DEVIL'S POOL** at Big Cedar Lodge an exclusive hunting-club vibe. The menu offers fresh rainbow trout, presumably just like the ones I didn't catch. They have deep-fried ravioli, too, a regional "delicacy." The reason to try and pass are the same: It's ground beef tucked into ravioli, deep-fried, and served as an appetizer.

THE KEETER CENTER on the campus of College of the Ozarks offers a Sunday brunch buffet that tastes remarkably home-cooked considering its size. Some menu items are grown and prepared by students. The Thanksgiving version is particularly strong: You have to make reservations months in advance.

LAMBERT'S CAFÉ is worth a visit for the atmosphere. It's organized chaos, and servers duck and weave as they carry "pass arounds" (fried okra, black-eyed peas, fried potatoes). Your kids (and maybe you) will "love" that the waitstaff throws rolls from across the room. Raise your hand, and seconds later, a roll will whiz toward it; try to catch it before it splashes into your soup.

MATT CROSSMAN is a freelance travel and adventure writer. A former Charlotte resident, he lives in St. Louis with his wife and two daughters. Subscribe to his Substack at mattcrossman.substack.com.

THE OFF-ROAD TAKEN

ON MY MOST RECENT TRIP to the Branson area, I arrived at **SOUTHERN MISSOURI OFF-ROAD RANCH** on a brisk fall morning. It's a privately owned system of trails for off-road vehicles in Seymour, Missouri, an hour's drive northeast.

I had rented a side-by-side from **SEYMOUR OFF-ROAD RENTALS**, and owners Dave Washburn and Erek Van Riessen agreed to show me around. I jumped in the driver's seat, gently nudged the throttle and—too much!—lurched out of the parking lot and toward a trail.

I turned into the woods and descended a rocky path that twisted right and left and up and down. All the while, Washburn and Van Riessen filled my ears with essential information for both my driving and my story. I stopped in the middle of a rocky creek and told Van Riessen: You drive this thing, because I'm physically and mentally overwhelmed.

With Van Riessen behind the wheel, we zipped along at what felt like top speed but wasn't. "You're going 40, and it feels like you're on fire," he said.

"We don't want to scare you to death," Washburn said. "We want to scare you to life."

COURTESY, EXPLORE BRANSON; BIG CEDAR LODGE (2); SEYMOUR OFF-ROAD RENTALS

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BOOKS

In These Precedented Times ...

A plea to revisit an American classic and an excerpt from my new book, *Finding Your Walden*

BY JEN TOTA McGIVNEY
PHOTOGRAPHS BY LOGAN CYRUS

BOOKS ARE BEST READ at the right moment, and rarely is a high school English class the right moment to read *Walden*. Revisit Henry David Thoreau's book as an adult, however, and some lines—"The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation"—hit harder.

When I studied Thoreau in graduate school at Winthrop University, I was his age at Walden Pond: 30. We shared preoccupations with questions of career, success, and time well spent—how to make a good living while living a good life. *Walden* isn't just beautiful literature but a manual to overcome distractions, resist conformity, and live fully. Those skills have become superpowers today.

Thoreau embraced a pragmatic idealism as the U.S. reeled politically, socially, and economically. He worked gigs as a surveyor and tutor to fund low-paying writing work and support his parents. He was an Underground Railroad operative, even after the Fugitive Slave Act threatened to imprison or bankrupt him. He threw a party each year for everyone in town but reserved moments of solitude each day. Thoreau lived a life of meaning, contribution, and connection while paying the bills. The dream.

Parallels between Thoreau's time and ours have grown unfortunately similar (politics, technology, and pandemic, oh my). Distractions and isolation plague us. Injustices require action. In *Finding Your Walden*, I turn Thoreau's ideas into a five-part philosophy of living well, even now—especially now. In this precedented time, Thoreau's ideas are just the company we need.

EXCERPT FROM

Finding Your Walden: How to Strive Less, Simplify More, and Embrace What Matters Most

(Walden) is a document of increasing pertinence; each year it seems to gain a little headway, as the world loses ground.
—E.B. White

HISTORY MAY NOT repeat, but it often rhymes, or so Mark Twain (might have) said. Our times rhyme with the times of Henry David Thoreau as neatly as a Dr. Seuss story.

If we could span a 175-year divide to pull up a chair beside Thoreau, we could chat all day with him. We'd talk about the pros and cons of belonging to generations when technology advanced more in our lifetimes than during previous centuries, revolutionizing how people lived, worked, and communicated. We'd gripe about dirty partisan politics, fanned by companies profiting from the divide. We'd talk about the rich getting richer, and the rest of us just working harder. We could even discuss how living during a pandemic compelled us to question our priorities and our relationship to work.

And yet! And yet "In these unprecedented times . . ." has become a cliché in news, in ads, in conversations. Why do we feel so alone in history? I believe it's beyond coincidence that our loss of historical connection has happened as fewer people read classic literature. These books didn't become classics just by getting old. They did because they're timeless stories about how people got through the chaos of life and how we might, too. These stories can give us company during these very precedented times. And we can find plenty of company in Thoreau's 1854 masterpiece, *Walden*; *Or, Life in the Woods*. In it, Thoreau looks at his fast-changing, conflict-ridden, overpriced world and wonders: Do I really need all this stuff? When should I take a job—and when should I leave one? What's my duty as an ethical citizen of a less-than-ethical world? How can I live a good life amid (insert hand-sweeping gesture) all of this?

We get it. We live during a similar philosophical reckoning. We now question assumptions that we barely noticed we even had—about what we need, what we don't—and we search for a new way, a simpler way. Thoreau's writing points us toward this way. He's proof that we're not as isolated as we feel, that another generation navigated something like this already and left guidebooks behind to help.

It's not just our generation that resists reading old books, however. Thoreau lamented that, even during his lifetime, not enough people hit the classics for inspiration. In *Walden*, Thoreau made a solid case to seek insight within the bindings of old books:

> *How many a man has dated*
> *a new era in his life from*
> *the reading of a book. The book*
> *exists for us perchance which*
> *will explain our miracles and reveal*
> *new ones. These same questions*
> *that disturb and puzzle and*
> *confound us have in their turn*
> *occurred to all the wise men . . .*
> *and each has answered them,*
> *according to his ability, by his*
> *words and his life.*

No book has dated a new era in my life like *Walden* has. No author has answered the questions that disturb and puzzle and confound me like Thoreau has. I've toted my dog-eared, underlined Everyman's edition with me for decades like a talisman. *Walden* has changed my life, and I'll show you how it might change yours, too.

NOT JUST LESS STUFF, BETTER STUFF

WHEN PEOPLE distill *Walden* down to a tattoo or bumper sticker, it's usually his most famous line: "Simplify, simplify." But it's easy to miss what Thoreau simplified for. He didn't simplify to have and to do less; he simplified to have and to do more of what mattered. To trade up, he pared down.

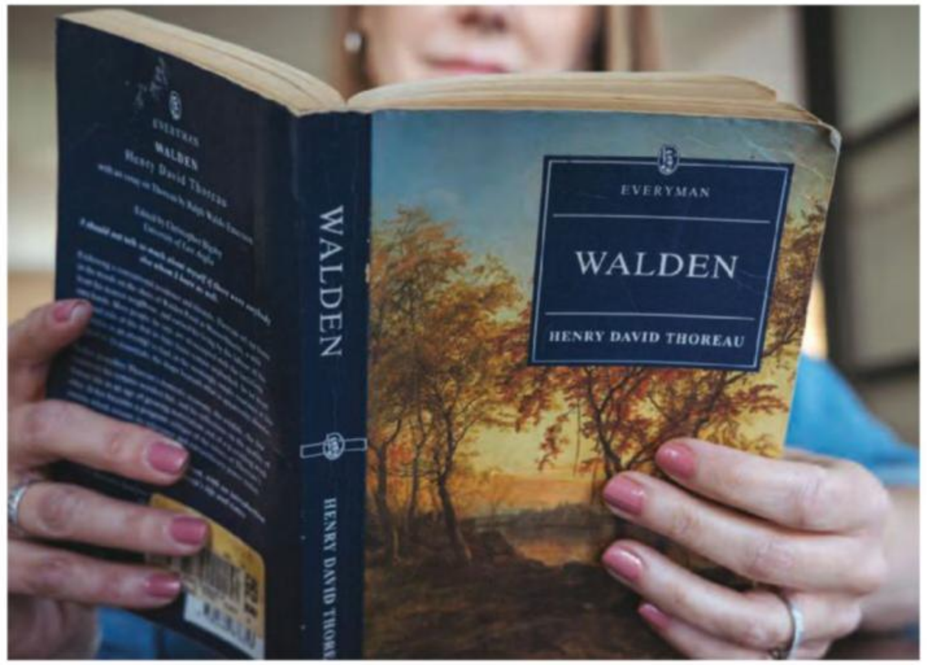
Contrast that to life today. We're drowning in a culture of accumulation. We never quite earn enough. Have enough. Do enough. We never quite are enough. We focus on what's next, believing that when we earn/have/do/become a little more, we can finally relax. We don't, of course, because then there's more to earn/have/do/become. There's a term for this: lifestyle creep. In its advanced stages, we bury so much of that good stuff we started with—our curiosity, our joy, our us-ness—beneath the weight of expectations of the person we hope to become without realizing the value of the person we've been all along.

"When we live in an era that moves so quickly, it's hard to pause long enough to wonder if we prioritize the right things, pursue the right goals. This is by design."

When we live in an era that moves so quickly, it's hard to pause long enough to wonder if we prioritize the right things, pursue the right goals. This is by design. The lifestyle that we've been sold lines others' pockets more than it enriches the quality of our days. We're told that work should be our passion, which makes overtime feel more like a sacrament than a sacrifice. Social media transforms our time—our life!—into engagements to be monetized. Consumerism makes everything available for purchase: status, beauty, health, even youth. New devices are sold to streamline our lives, but they distract us from them. "Our inventions are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things," Thoreau wrote.

As a transcendentalist, Thoreau believed that people are innately good and that we are born with an intuition that will guide us to the right decisions if we listen to it. It's our job not to drown our intuition beneath the demands of a society that doesn't have our best interests at heart. "I am convinced, both by faith and experience, that to maintain one's self on this earth is not a hardship but a pastime, if we live simply and wisely," he wrote.

It's a crucial time to seek wisdom in this philosophy. "A cardiologist, endocrinologist, obesity specialist, health economist and social epidemiologists all said versions of the same thing: Striving to get ahead in an unequal society contributes to people in the United States aging quicker, becoming sicker and dying younger," according to a story in *The Washington Post*. While many of these strivers have no choice (people who work multiple jobs to put enough food on the table), others do so voluntarily. It's what we're conditioned to do—to never stop climbing—as success perpetually awaits on the next rung. But this isn't the only version of success. It's worthwhile to question what this society asks of us and what we're willing to give



it. And no writer questions that better than Thoreau.

Thoreau encourages us to define success for ourselves—to recognize when we can strive a little less and live a little more. He teaches that there can be more power in letting go than adding on.

This is a message of radical hope. Thoreau insists that life has so much joy to offer if we live intentionally and prioritize wisely. How we choose to live can become our greatest art:

> *I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by a conscious endeavor. It is something to be able to paint a particular picture, or to carve a statue, and so to make a few objects beautiful; but it is far more glorious to carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look, which morally we can do. To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of arts.*

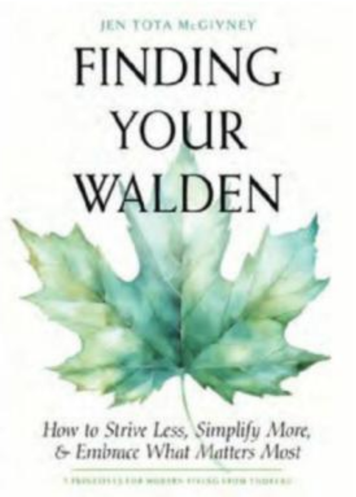
Thoreau had one mission: to encourage people to pause, to notice, to question. He points to the beauty of what's in front of us, if only we'd see it: "Heaven is under our feet as well as over our heads." To do that, we must consider if a better way of living exists, even if it's one that no one has thought of yet—or, perhaps, *especially* if it's one that no one has thought of yet.

A TOUGH READ AND A HARD SELL

I ADMIT THAT *Walden* isn't an easy read. The language is dated. Thoreau's dad jokes have aged from corny to inscrutable. (The guy loved a pun.) Suggesting that someone unwind after a hard day with 19th-century literature is a big ask. We're inundated with words all day: emails, articles, texts—it never stops. The problem isn't that we don't read; it's that we read so much that it feels hard to relax by reading even more. When we skip the great books, however, we miss so much—enjoyment and challenge, sure, but we also miss the chance to meet someone who lived centuries ago and think, "Hey, you too?"

After years of trying and failing to get my friends to read *Walden* (I'm fun at parties), I changed tactics. I pitched a story to *Success* magazine about how the messages of *Walden* can improve our work lives. Pitching a story about Thoreau to *Success* is like pitching a story about barbecue to *Vegetarian Times*. Thoreau's reputation isn't exactly about crushing it in the office. But it worked. The grateful reader emails I received proved that Thoreau is the man for our age, even if *Walden* might not be the reading material for our time.

I've expanded that concept here. I've turned Thoreau's writings into a philosophy of 21st-century intentional living. In this book, you'll learn why experts—from physicians to career coaches to psychologists—support Thoreau's ideas as inspiration for living well. Alongside them, you'll read about people who live those ideas today, who make big and little acts of everyday resistance against the demands of the status quo. This book isn't a step-by-step guide to intentional living but a choose-your-own adventure. It shares all kinds of ideas, from major life-upending experiments to minor lifestyle tweaks. What does it look like to live a Thoreauvian life? For one couple in this book, it looks like selling their home to fund a year-long sabbatical in Bali with their kids to rediscover what they need (and what they don't) and who they are (and what they aren't). For some, it looks like downshifting to a four-day workweek or adopting a digital sabbath. For one woman, it simply looks like downsizing her clothes into a capsule wardrobe that declutters her closet and streamlines her routine. Each person has applied creativity, simplification, and joy to the experiment of life and offers inspiration on how we might too. If you take one thing from Thoreau and the people in this book, take this: Life is, after all, an experiment. No one can tell us how to do it; it's something we need to figure out as we go. And if our life looks suspiciously like the lives of the people around us, we might be doing it wrong. ■


JEN TOTA McGIVNEY
FINDING YOUR WALDEN
How to Strive Less, Simplify More, & Embrace What Matters Most

Adapted and reprinted with permission from Hampton Roads Publishing, Finding Your Walden *by Jen Tota McGivney is available wherever books and e-books are sold or directly from the publisher at redwheelweiser.com or 800-423-7087.*

JEN TOTA McGIVNEY is a writer in Charlotte and the back-page columnist for this magazine.

LOGAN CYRUS (1); COURTESY, HAMPTON ROADS PUBLISHING

FIVE STAR PROFESSIONAL

2025 FIVE STAR WEALTH MANAGERS

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JEFF CRAVOTTA

“Men’s prints have blossomed,” Mainwaring says. “The whole mix-and-match is more common in women’s than men’s fashion. We didn’t expect people to buy that way, but people surprised us, so we’ve embraced that principle of mixing and matching prints.”

COURTESY, RUUD BAAN

STYLE

Lords of Harlech

The Charlotte-based menswear brand blends the American experience with international flair

BY TAYLOR BOWLER

“LORDS OF HARLECH” refers to the historical rulers of Harlech Castle in Wales, a medieval fortress. It’s also the name of the Charlotte-based menswear brand that Paul Mainwaring founded in 2016. Known for its vibrant colors, bold prints, and intricate embroidery, Lords of Harlech stands out in a space that favors minimalist, monochromatic looks.

In the last nine years, the British designer has grown this small, luxury label to an international brand sold in more than 30 countries. “We’re not high fashion—we’re wearable fashion for men,” he says. “I always liked color, but I’m using it in a way for men that’s not as crazy as it would seem. Color, print, and texture are important. We combined that with luxury fibers, and that’s where we positioned the brand.”

Collections have names like Rockstar, Dragon, and Speakeasy. Season after season, his prints have grown bolder. His last fall-winter collection, Pompeii, pulled inspiration from the aging statues, brickwork, and mosaics from the ruins of the ancient Italian city. “Florals are a big part of what we do. That’s our safe go-to,” Mainwaring says. “We do a lot of paisley but not traditional paisley. This is more lively and fresh.”

When we speak over Zoom in January, Mainwaring has just returned from a fashion show in Florence, Italy. He’s in Charlotte for less than 48 hours before he leaves for a trade show in Copenhagen. Two weeks after that, he’ll be in Chicago to show his spring collection. He says he’s jet-lagged, but I’m too charmed by his accent to notice.

Mainwaring, 55, was born in England to a Welsh father and English mother. He came to New York in 1999 for a job with Saks Fifth Avenue, then worked for several retail brands, including Nordstrom and Urban Outfitters. He moved to Charlotte in 2012, when Belk hired him to build their private men’s label. Four years later, he left to start Lords of Harlech.

“I saw a gap in the menswear market,” Mainwaring says. “North Carolina has Peter Millar in the traditional market ... but there is a consumer out there looking for some fun prints, and we’re tapping into that.”

When our conversation turns to textiles, Mainwaring grows more animated and seems to forget about his jet lag. “We do everything from scratch,” he says. “We don’t buy anyone else’s fabrics. We apply the prints to the textiles we develop ... We developed knit merino shirts, which sounds very heavy, but it’s not. It’s the best fabric to be worn in the heat.”

He’s done most of his manufacturing in Asia, but last year, Lords of Harlech launched its highest-priced collection, which it manufactured in Italy. The spring 2025 collection, Meadow Memories, is “quite artistic” and “a little bit dreamy in its approach.” He’s also working on a women’s line that will launch in September.

Today, Mainwaring lives in Salisbury and works out of a corporate office off Nations Ford Road in south Charlotte. “It’s a little creative hub,” he says. “It’s half-warehouse, half-office, and we have space where we do a bit of photography.” He employs eight people in North Carolina and 25 globally. Lords of Harlech doesn’t have a storefront in Charlotte, but the designs are available online and at Bruce Julian Clothier, the longtime menswear boutique in Myers Park.

Mainwaring has built his brand as a wholesaler to a small roster of independent boutiques and luxury resort shops in the U.S. and Europe. In February, he expanded with his first storefront in Amsterdam. “We purposely kept away from competing against retailers,” he says. “Amsterdam doesn’t have many multi-brand retail outlets. It’s a bohemian city, so it’s apt for what we see as our consumer.”

Despite all of his globetrotting, it made sense to Mainwaring to base his business in Charlotte. “Bizarrely enough, Charlotte has been a big influence,” he says. “Back in the day, it was a textile hub. Knit fabrics and denim were a big part of that. So there’s a rich history in textiles ... and the South tends to be more traditional in its approach to fashion, but we’ve found consumers looking for what we do. It’s great to see consumers in small North Carolina towns buying from us.” ◼

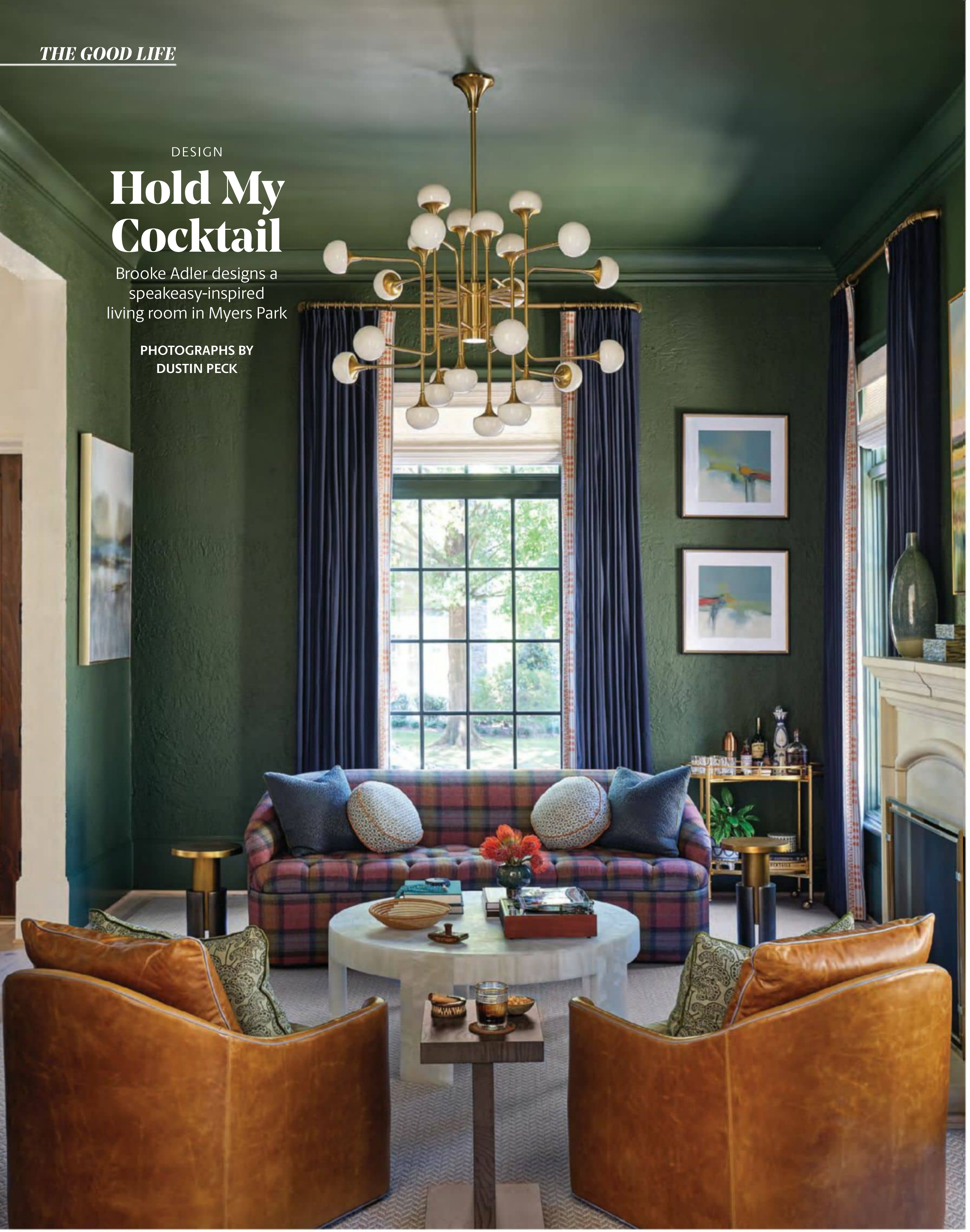
TAYLOR BOWLER is the lifestyle editor.

DESIGN

Hold My Cocktail

Brooke Adler designs a speakeasy-inspired living room in Myers Park

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
DUSTIN PECK



BROOKE ADLER'S CLIENTS invited her to see their new Myers Park home the day they closed on the property. Adler remembers the first floor having no dimension, color, or lighting and describes the living room as "a cold, white box." The 3,300-square-foot house also had a family room adjacent to the kitchen, so the homeowners wanted this space to be an adults-only area. "This was the husband's room," Adler says. "The dining room was her space to play, and the living room was his. He wanted it saturated in color ... and to feel like a speakeasy where you could have a cigar and bourbon." *—Taylor Bowler*

GREEN LIGHT

Adler painted the walls, trim, and 14-foot ceiling in Backwoods by Benjamin Moore. "He wanted it to feel moody, so I knew he'd be open to navy or dark green," she says. "With those tall ceilings and windows, there was no chance of it feeling too dark. We added automated shades for functionality, but that was the only white in the room." For lighting, Adler wanted to get the scale right ("most lighting is designed for 10-foot ceilings"), so she chose a gold statement chandelier from Hudson Valley. "He likes a modern spin, and this lighting is a fun way to go in that direction."

NEW GROUND

The fireplace and built-in shelves were original to the room, but everything else was new. Adler added an area rug from Stark, a custom upholstered sofa from Highland House, and an onyx coffee table from Vanguard Furniture. The leather accent chairs, also from Highland House, have custom blue piping for contrast. Gold accent tables from Arteriors encase the sofa, and the gold bar cart from Villa & House holds the homeowner's cocktail accoutrements. To punch up the blue drapes, Adler added a custom Christopher Farr Cloth trim. "I wanted that pop of orange to bring out the orange in the sofa," she says. "The drapes could be dark without making the room feel small."

FINISHING TOUCHES

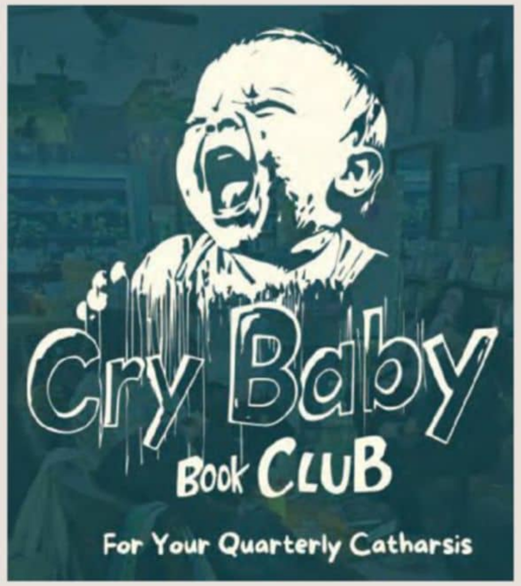
Adler had the painting above the fireplace commissioned by local artist Libby Smart and found the prints on the adjacent wall at Wendover Art. She dialed up the inside of the bookshelves with a gray grass cloth from Thibaut and accessorized them with items she collected during the year. "The basket on the bottom right I found in the Outer Banks. ... The antique bowl on the top shelf I found at an antiques market in Texas," she says. "The Wedgwood china belonged to her mother, and those are her family's records. These are all pieces that mean something to them."

CULTURE

The Playlist

THE BEST THINGS TO DO
AND SEE THIS MONTH

BY TESS ALLEN



Belmont Bookshop Events

Various dates

The downtown Belmont bookstore offers a packed calendar of events this month, including a board game night; weekly storytimes for kids; book clubs with themes ranging from Blind Date to Morbidly Curious; and a community creators night.
Belmont Bookshop, *belmontbookshop.com*

THESE EVENTS give you a good excuse to check out places that won BOB Awards—not that you need one.

Resident Culture Beer Pong Tournament

Friday, May 9

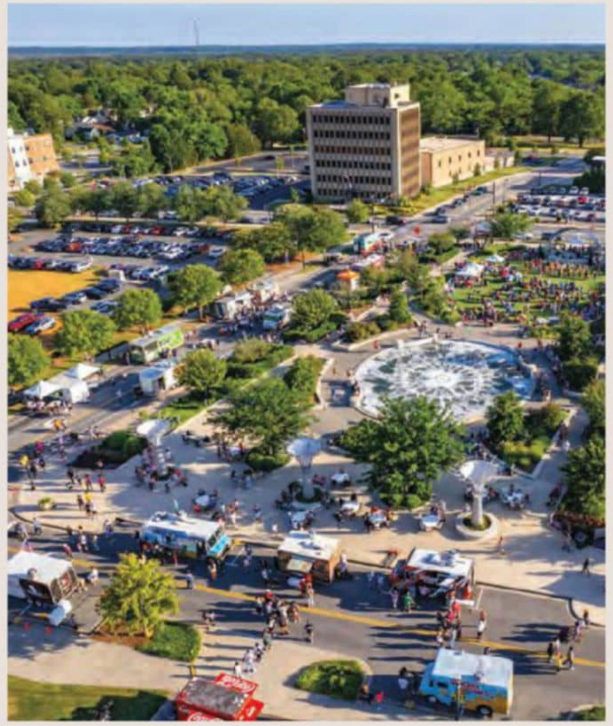
Think you're the best at beer pong? Find out at Resident Culture's monthly double-elimination tourney. You'll have fun even if you don't win a prize, and competitors and spectators alike are invited to enjoy barbecue, beer, and cocktails. The tournament is free, but online registration is required. Check-in is at 7 p.m., and the competition starts at 7:30 p.m.
Resident Culture South End, *residentculturebrewing.com*

Sadie's Flowers Pop-Up at Keepsake Brewery

Saturday, May 10

Join Sadie's Flowers at Keepsake Brewery for a Mother's Day pop-up. Buy pre-bundled bouquets or build your own at the flower bar. (Pre-orders also available via @sadies_flowers on Instagram.)
Noon-4 p.m.
Keepsake Brewery, Gastonia, *keepsakebrewery.com*

COURTESY, BELMONT BOOKSHOP; SADIE'S FLOWERS



Food Truck Friday at Fountain Park

Friday, May 16

Every third Friday from May through September, Old Town Rock Hill brims with popular food trucks, kids activities, live music, and local restaurant and beer vendors.
6-10 p.m. Fountain Park, 300 E. Main St., Rock Hill, S.C., *onlyinoldtown.com*

COURTESY, CITY OF ROCK HILL; RUSTY WILLIAMS

Tea Circle with Michael Anthony

Friday, May 16

Self-proclaimed psychic healer Michael Anthony hosts a tea circle at Sanctuary Imports on the third Friday of each month. Bring your favorite mug to fill with a supplied tonic tea drink and share your triumphs and challenges with a supportive group. Tickets: $15.
7-8:30 p.m. Sanctuary Imports, *sanctuaryimportsclt.com*

Plants & Pastries 2.0

Saturday, May 17

Catch Ashik Bakery's monthly pop-up, this time at Grow Charlotte in Camp North End, to load up on croissants and seasonal pastry specials. Get there early to get first dibs.
11 a.m. Grow Charlotte, *@ashikbakery*

Dilworth Jubilee in Latta Park

Saturday, May 17

The Dilworth Community Association has hosted the neighborhood festival each year since 1972. Centered on the Pavilion in Latta Park, the gathering will have live music, food trucks, a beer garden, a pet parade, kids activities, and more. Bring lawn chairs or picnic blankets and spend the afternoon with your Dilworth neighbors.
Noon-5 p.m. Latta Park, *dilworthonline.org*

VisArt Presents: Cruelty-Free Comedy Show

Sunday, May 25

Charlotte comedians and variety entertainers come together for this family-friendly show. Billed for ages 10 and up, it has "stand-up, music, gentle audience interaction, friendly crowd play, surprises, great vibes, and lots of laughter" in a "positive, upbeat, feel-good atmosphere." (No religion, politics, or mean-spirited humor allowed.) Tickets: $15 ($20 at door).
6-7:30 p.m. VisArt Video, *visartvideo.org*

INDEPENDENT

The Independent Picture House Showings

Various dates

As of this writing, the arthouse cinema's May lineup includes showings of *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me, Lost Highway, Pedicab Driver, Mulholland Drive, The Elephant Man, Some Like it Hot,* and *Amadeus.*
The Independent Picture House, *independentpicturehouse.org*

Charlotte Disc Golf Club's Course Cleanup League

Saturday, May 31

Join the Charlotte Disc Golf Club to clean up trash along the Kilborne Park disc golf course (grabbers, bags, and gloves provided) before you dive into the game.
9 a.m.-3 p.m. Kilborne Park, *charlottedgc.com*

Substrate's Wednesday Wine Tastings

Wednesdays

Enjoy free wine tastings with vinyl tunes at the cool NoDa wine bar on Wednesdays. Each week will feature a different theme, with wines from a particular region, style, or producer.
5-7 p.m. Substrate, *substrateclt.square.site*

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MAY 29

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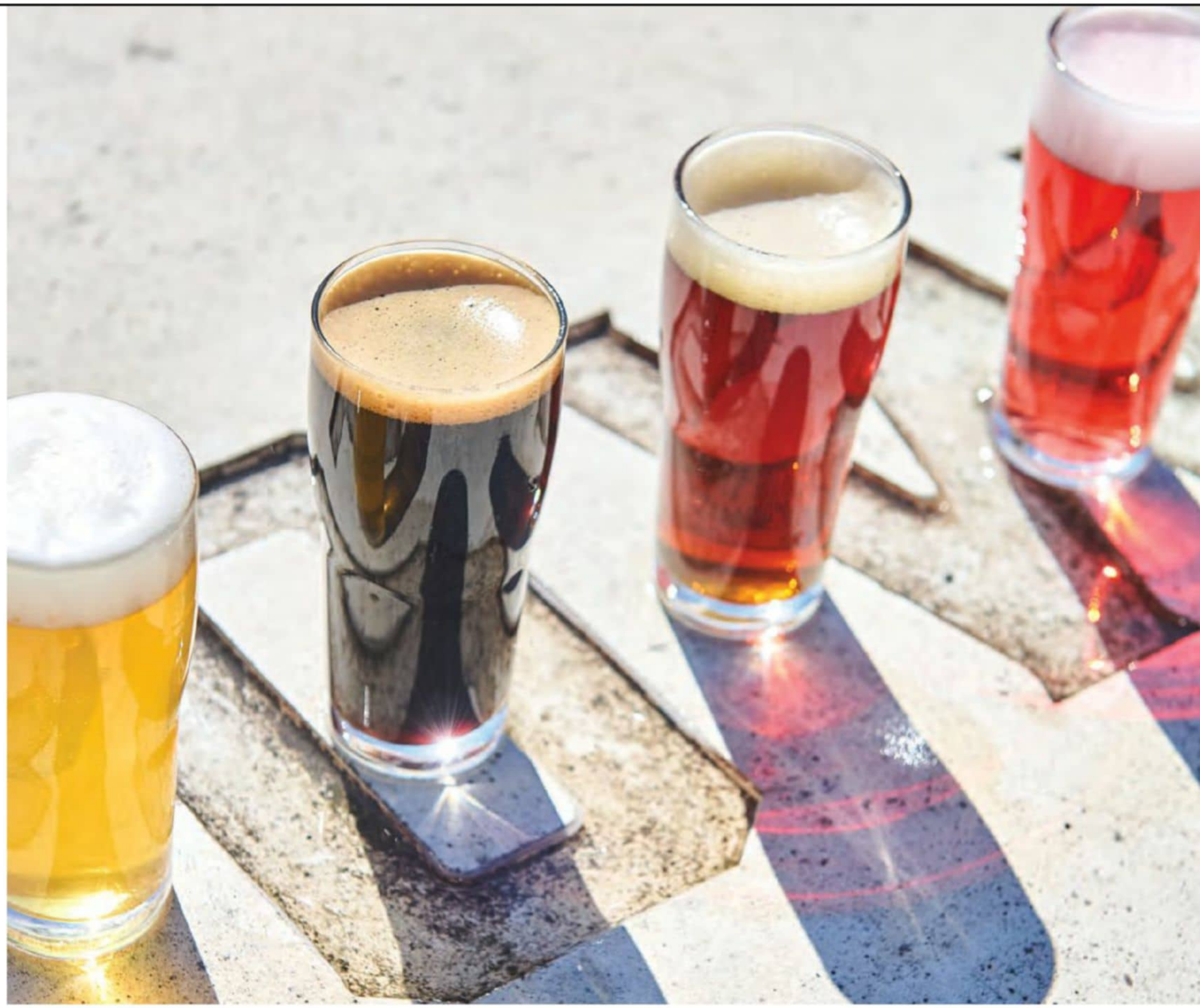

BEER

'CRAFTING VARIETY'

A Charlotte brewer's Many Faces Initiative fosters inclusivity in North Carolina craft beer

BY TESS ALLEN
PHOTOGRAPHS BY LAUREN VIED ALLEN

IN MAY 2020, police killed George Floyd outside a convenience store in Minneapolis. The murder of another Black man at the hands of police sparked nationwide protests that called for an end to systemic racism—not just in law enforcement but across society.

Continued on next page ➔

Brian Quinn, the former head brewer at Town Brewing, co-founded Atomic Clock Brewing in Durham last year with his sister, Colleen.

“One thing I love about the craft beer industry is that most brewery owners do very much feel that they want to be contributing more than just making beer.”

—BRIAN QUINN

Thousands of miles away in Charlotte, Brian Quinn—then head brewer at Town Brewing and on the board of directors for the North Carolina Craft Brewers Guild—took stock of the industry he’s been a part of since he left investment banking in 2011. Most brewery staff and patrons, he says, are white men like himself. “A taproom space in its best iteration can really serve as a third space, that kind of de facto community center,” Quinn says. “But then the more I’m looking at it, I’m like, how culturally inclusive is this space, or how representative of the communities in which these breweries are situated are the customers that are coming out to these places? ... And as much as taprooms try to scream that they welcome everyone, there’s clearly some kind of disconnect.”

He knew something else about beer people: “One thing I love about the craft beer industry is that most brewery owners do very much feel that they want to be contributing more than just making beer,” he says. “And when brewers come together, they can get a lot done.”

That summer, Quinn launched the Many Faces Initiative to foster diversity and inclusivity in North Carolina craft beer. In its first year, Many Faces set to work raising money: around $9,000, through the sales of Town Brewing’s Many Faces West Coast IPA. In 2021, with fewer constraints from COVID, he launched the Many Faces Initiative internship, for people of color who want to pursue careers in the craft beer industry. (Quinn has since left Town Brewing to open Atomic Clock Brewing in Durham, but Town is still one of the most involved breweries in the initiative.)

“We didn’t want to just post a black square on Instagram and have that be enough,” Quinn says. “There were a lot of things that were feeling extremely performative at the time. But this felt like something that could have a lasting impact within craft beer in North Carolina by opening breweries’ eyes to different ways to bring in new talent and demographics. And on the flip side, by bringing in more people of color who are interested in craft beer as employees, suddenly your customers start looking different.”

Many Faces has hosted up to five interns each summer since. It partners with breweries across the state, including Town, to train them. With the money it continues to raise, Many Faces pays the interns, which widens the net of breweries that can afford to host them. “It’s tough, in general, for smaller craft breweries to hire, let alone hire someone who might be very, very green (to the industry),” Quinn says. “I wanted smaller breweries—ones that don’t even have an HR department—to be able to get involved in the very necessary DEI work.”

During the 10-week program, interns at each host brewery rotate through the areas of operations, attend Many Faces’ networking and education events, and complete a capstone project on a craft beer topic they choose. Kevin Sampson was a Many Faces intern last summer at Town Brewing. He’s a filmmaker, the founder of the DC Black Film Festival, and a film professor at Central Piedmont Community College and Northern Virginia Community College.

“I’ve always enjoyed beer,” he says, “but being from Columbia, (South Carolina), I used to just be like, ‘Give me a Bud Light.’ But then I moved to D.C., and my coworkers are like, ‘Try this Allagash’ and all these different kinds of beers. And I’m like, ‘Wow, an IPA, what is this?’ And so that kind of opened my eyes to the variety—the vastness, if you will—of beer.”

In 2017, after a decade in D.C., Sampson and his wife, Alexandra, moved to Charlotte. During COVID, she gifted him a virtual homebrewing class. Then one day, Alexandra’s colleague gave her some beer that his wife, Brittany Makitan, had made through a program she’d just completed: the Many Faces Initiative.

During Kevin Sampson’s Many Faces Initiative internship last summer, he crafted his own brew, Mama Said Knock You Stout.

“The beer was, like, in a can, it had a label on it, it looked good. And I was like, ‘Yo, I’ve got to do that.’”

—KEVIN SAMPSON

“The beer was, like, in a can, it had a label on it, it looked good,” Sampson recalls with a chuckle. “And I was like, ‘Yo, I’ve got to do that.’” He applied the following year and started his internship last June.

For his capstone, Sampson started a documentary called *Crafting Variety*—as of press time, he expected to complete it in April—to explore diversity in the craft beer industry. For people of color, he says, “you don’t see people who look like you when you go to breweries unless it’s a Black-owned brewery.” (Less than 1% of U.S. breweries are Black-owned, according to industry data.) “What I’ve come away with from doing this documentary and ingraining myself in the industry is that there are these invisible walls that put up barriers. But I think sometimes you just need someone to say, ‘Hey, look, it’s OK. Just go in.’”

Sampson says the Many Faces Initiative is breaking those barriers. “I can’t show my support enough for the Many Faces Initiative,” he says, “because, in a world where diversity, equity, and inclusion are becoming bad words, they didn’t stop after 2020. A lot of these DEI programs kind of started but didn’t all last. And as a Black man, I know when people are being performative, and I know when people are being genuine. And the Many Faces Initiative as well as Town Brewing—they’re just genuine. Like, they just have their arms open wide.”

TESS ALLEN is the associate editor.

Squeeze the day!
the Whole Hope
GINGER TURMERIC LEMON

LOCAL FLAVOR

THE WHOLE HOPE

Holistic health coach Hope Skouras created a wellness product out of necessity

BY TAYLOR BOWLER

PHOTOGRAPHS BY PETER TAYLOR

HOPE SKOURAS was just 17 and a rising senior at Charlotte Latin School when she began to experience severe abdominal pain. She saw a range of specialists who tested her for acid reflux, ulcers, and celiac disease. "The last thing I was told was, if I got a colonoscopy, and it showed nothing, I would be sent to a psychiatrist," she says. But that colonoscopy revealed Crohn's disease, a chronic, inflammatory bowel disease that affects the lining of the digestive tract.

Her gastroenterologist prescribed a medication called Remicade, and she came home from Wake Forest University every six to eight weeks to get her IV infusion. "It wasn't until I graduated that it stopped working," Skouras says. "I formed an antibody to it."

In 2012, she had another massive flare-up that required surgery to remove the diseased tissue in her intestine. It took a few years—and a new medication—to achieve full remission. She married her husband, Spyros, in 2014 and was able to have three healthy kids.

But in 2021, after the birth of her third child, Skouras started showing symptoms of another flare-up. Her doctor noticed a narrowing of her intestine where she'd had her previous surgery. They changed her medication again and told her they'd keep evaluating her, but another surgery was inevitable. "That was unacceptable to me," she says. "I thought, *There has to be a different way.*"

Squeeze the day!
the Whole Hope
Lemon Swirls
"THE OG"
GINGER TURMERIC LEMON

Each packet comes with six swirls and can be purchased locally at Reid's Fine Foods or online for $15.99.

Her father-in-law encouraged her to pursue a holistic route and connected her with a functional medicine doctor at Companion Health. "I was a stubborn Taurus, but I gave it a shot," Skouras says. "The second I went in there, we talked about things no one had ever talked about—diet, nutrition, hormones." She was assigned a health coach who overhauled her diet. Skouras gave up all gluten and dairy and began drinking a warm cup of lemon water every day. That simple morning ritual improved her symptoms almost immediately, and she became fascinated with the benefits of lemon water.

"My health coach said, 'I think you'd be really good at this,'" Skouras says. "I thought, *Why not? My kids are getting older. I'm going to get certified.*" She became an integrative nutrition health coach and launched The Whole Hope on Instagram. One of her first posts was the lemon water recipe, which also includes ginger, turmeric, and honey. "Lemons are high in citric acid, which helps the body with detoxification," Skouras says. "Ginger is great for digestive health, and turmeric is an anti-inflammatory. The honey adds a bit of sweetness but won't spike your blood sugar. I recommend it on an empty stomach with warm water."

Her followers loved this natural elixir, but for many, it added yet another task to the morning rush. "No one needs another step in their morning," Skouras says, "so I became fixated on making it easier so no one could say they didn't have time anymore."

She developed a frozen, lemon slice-shaped swirl tablet with organic lemon juice, ginger, honey, and non-GMO turmeric to be dropped and dissolved in a cup of warm water. Her husband got in touch with Richard Reutter, his friend from business school who is CEO of Caroline's Cakes. Reutter invited Skouras to their facility in Spartanburg, South Carolina, to learn about production and perfect her recipe.

By January 2024, Skouras knew she had something, so she left health coaching to pursue The Whole Hope full time. She began selling the tablets through her website. Then a friend from church introduced her to Brave Broth founder Joanna Reule. Reule, too, was a Charlotte mom, and she'd created a line of popular bone broths sold at Reid's Fine Foods. She connected Skouras to the team at Reid's, and they placed an order the same week. "They haven't stopped since," Skouras says. "In January (2025), we doubled our sales. Now they're placing orders a few times a month."

Skouras has moved from her home kitchen to a commercial kitchen on Latrobe Drive, and she recently hired two women to help her part time. She'd like to keep growing the brand, but she's in no rush. "I've been a stay-at-home mom for so many years, and I've never worked in the food industry, so I'm learning as I go," she says. "But I have more flavors in my head that I can't wait to get out there."

TAYLOR BOWLER is the lifestyle editor.

Manny Pérez-Ochoa with his sister, Ana Acela Pérez, at El Puro.

COURTESY, EL PURO

THE DISH

ON THE FRONT BURNER

How is Charlotte's booming Latino population changing the city's food scene?

BY TAYLOR BOWLER

I FIRST MET Emanuel “Manny” Pérez-Ochoa and his sister, Ana Acela Pérez, in 2021, when their family opened El Puro. They transformed a former steakhouse in Madison Park into a Cuban restaurant reminiscent of pre-revolutionary Havana, before Castro stripped it of glamour. Their family already owned Havana Carolina Restaurant & Bar in Concord, but they saw an opportunity for another Cuban restaurant closer to the city center. The stretch of South Boulevard between Woodlawn and Arrowood roads was an emerging hub for authentic food from all over Latin America, including Honduras, El Salvador, Peru, Colombia, and Venezuela.

“We liked south Charlotte—the traffic and community that lives toward this side of town is different,” Manny says. “They're used to going out and eating every day. In Concord, they don't have a lot of Latin food close by.”

Two years later, along with Manny's Colombian wife, Carolina, they opened Muraya, a Colombian-inspired lounge in South End. Their newest venture, Babaloo Coffee Club, which opened in South End in January, serves La Colombe coffee, empanadas, and Cuban sandwiches and pastries. In the current political climate, they say it's more important than ever to spread their culture throughout the Carolinas.

They're too young to remember Charlotte in the '90s—Manny is 26 and Ana is 24—but they know they're building on a cultural shift that began just a few decades ago. When Bank of America moved its headquarters to Charlotte in 1992, the city didn't have enough local blue-collar workers to build the uptown skyscraper, so they recruited construction workers from Texas. News of the worker shortage spread throughout the Latino community—on both sides of the border—and local immigration rates surged. Between 2010 and 2019, Charlotte's Latino population grew by 36%, more than twice as fast as the overall population (15.4%), according to UNC Charlotte Urban Institute.

Today, Latinos are still the city's fastest-growing demographic. It's created an opening for more Latino-owned businesses like the Pérez-Ochoas'. But introducing Cuban culture to a Southern city took some time, even in 2021. “When you're the first person to bring something new, when there's nothing else like it, it's hard to say, ‘This is how we eat and drink,’” Ana says. “When we first opened (El Puro), there wasn't as much going on around here, so a lot of people would just come here for the music. Now more people know, but at the beginning, it was hard. Latino culture is usually associated with cheap food. Italian, French are more elevated. But our food and culture can be elevated, too.”

The Colombian menu at Muraya didn't immediately resonate, either. They hired a chef from Carolina's hometown to make traditional dishes. “That's a mistake we made in the beginning,” Manny says.

Continued on page 50➔

VILLAGE
life

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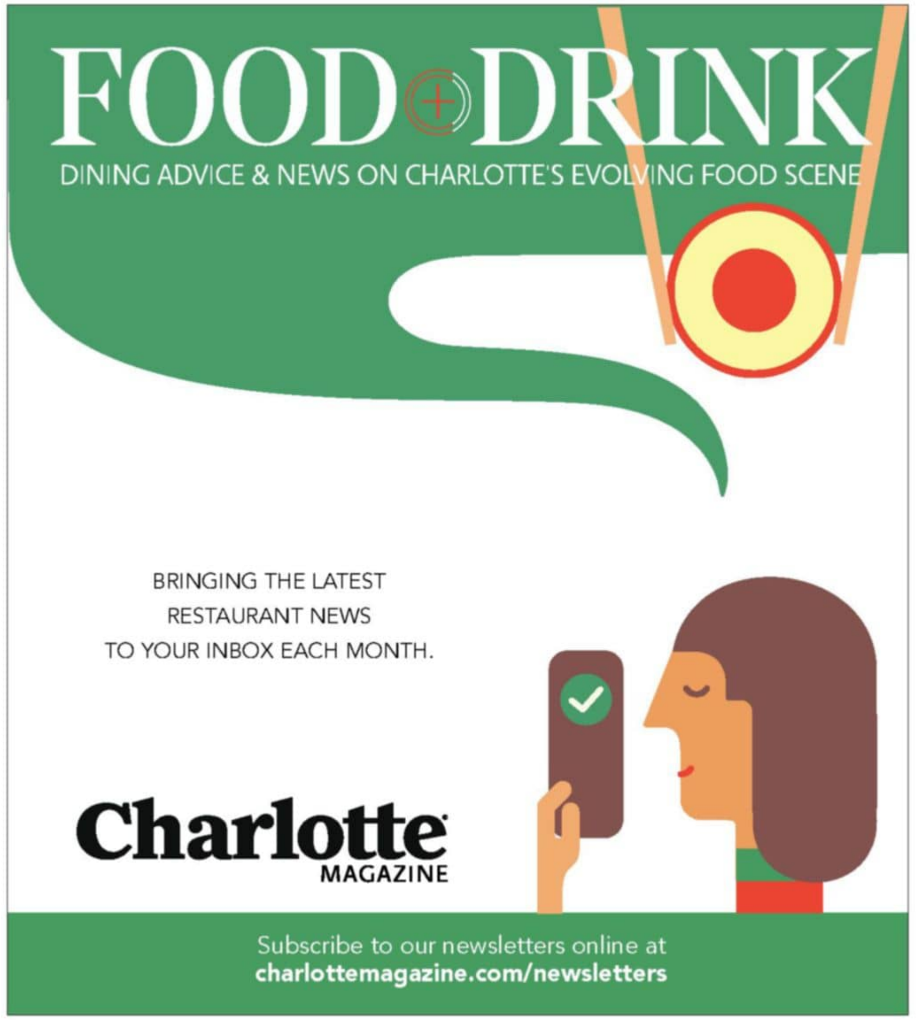
Babaloo's menu includes Cuban sandwiches (above), a Freddo Cappuccino (right), and Chorizo Empanadas (far right).

"Now, Muraya is Cartagena-*inspired*. It might be too greasy if we serve it the way they have it in Colombia … and there are certain ingredients we just can't get here. We use local ingredients from local farms, but we're still learning new trends in the industry."

At Babaloo Coffee Club, the menu is a mix of Cuban and Colombian flavors, and customers have been quicker to understand it. It helps that the Pérez-Ochoas have more name recognition now, but they suspect the city's appetite for Latin cuisine has expanded, too. And not just in the restaurant industry. As of 2024, Charlotte was home to more than 8,000 Latino-owned businesses.

"In Cuba, 'babaloo' is the energy that heals," Manny says. "If you ask anyone in Cuba, they know what we're talking about. If we can bring a piece of our culture, with the music, food, and drinks, then I think we're doing something good for the community." ◆

TAYLOR BOWLER is the lifestyle editor.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BITE-SIZED NEWS

Foodie Tidbits on a Small Plate

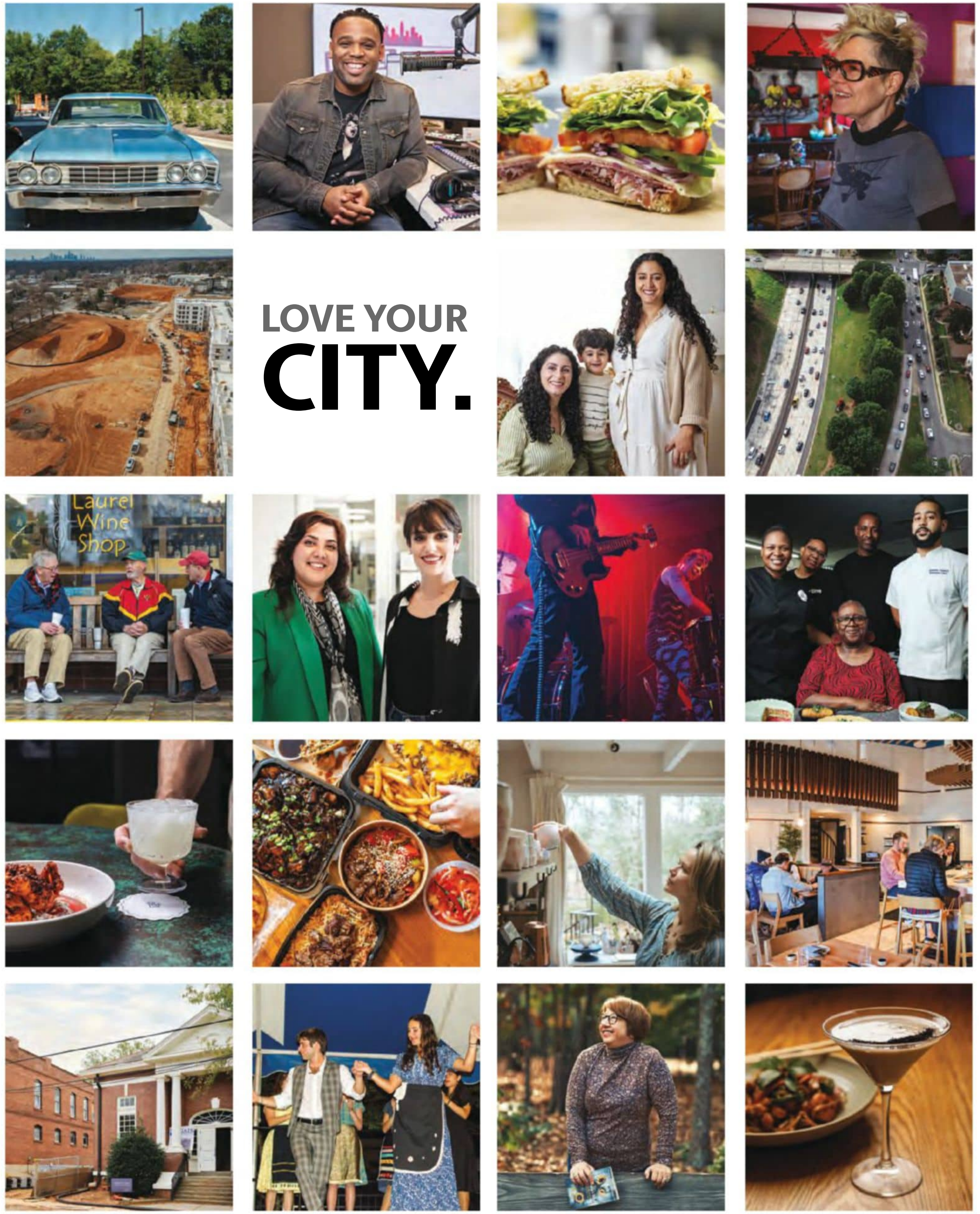
Denver-based steakhouse **GUARD AND GRACE** will open its first Charlotte location on the 10th floor of 1111 S. Tryon St. in mid-2026. The 10,224-square-foot space will have a full-service bar, multiple private dining rooms, and a 2,000-square-foot terrace.

NICKYO'S RODEO is now open at 120 W. Bland St. in South End. The Western-themed bar is a revival of the Charlotte restaurant and bar located on Providence Road from 1985 to 1994.

HARRIET'S HAMBURGERS will open its fourth Charlotte location this month at East John and Trade streets in Matthews. Expect a simple menu of burgers, fries, and shakes in a retro setting.

Chef Bruce Moffett will open **SALA**, a Mediterranean-inspired wine and cocktail bar, next door to its sister concept, Stagioni, in June. The menu will also feature light snacks, spreads, and "strip pizza," a rectangular cut of focaccia topped with tomato sauce and grated Parmesan and served at room temperature. —*Taylor Bowler*

COURTESY, BABALOO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Charlotte
MAGAZINE

King of Fire's signature Honey Pie (at left) and Greek Pie.

RESTAURANTS

Get a Pizza This

Where to find the
best 'za in Charlotte

PHOTOGRAPHS BY PETER TAYLOR

Kerrel Thompson, co-owner of Bird Pizzeria, garnishes a pie with fresh Parmesan (above).

NEAPOLITAN, Chicago deep-dish, New York-style, Sicilian, Detroit-style. Everyone has their favorite, but we can all agree that pizza is a universally loved food. —*Taylor Bowler*

SEE OUR WEBSITE FOR A FULL DIRECTORY OF RESTAURANT LISTINGS.

Zepeddie's Pizzeria's Sicilian-style Bianca (left) and Aliño's 16-inch wood-fired pie (above).

FEATURED
RESTAURANT

PIZZA BABY

Multiple locations

PIZZA BABY was born in Charlotte, but its 18-inch New York-style pies might have you believe otherwise. Co-owners Trey Wilson and Steven De Falco took bread-making courses with pizzaiolos in Long Island and tested 29 dough recipes before they opened Pizza Baby West in Wesley Heights. Its sister restaurant, Pizza Baby East, is in Elizabeth.

The Mother (top) and Rosemary (right) pies at Pizza Baby West.

OSTERIA LUCA
4127 Park Road
The team behind True Crafted Pizza opened this Italian restaurant in Park Road Shopping Center, and the wood-fired pizzas are the main attraction.

SAL'S PIZZA FACTORY
3723 Monroe Road
This spot can make quick believers of those New Yorker friends who can't stop complaining about our city's lack of "good pizza."

BENNY PENNELLO'S
2909 N. Davidson St., Ste. 100
Enjoy 28-inch signature pizzas by the slice here and at sister location Benny Ferrovia's in South End.

STAGIONI
715 Providence Road
The sausage is ground in Stagioni's kitchen, the mozzarella is house-made, and you get to cut the pie with pizza shears.

HAWTHORNE'S NEW YORK PIZZA AND BAR
Multiple locations
Hawthorne's made national headlines when nearly 70 visitors reported that the restaurant's Buffalo chicken pizza—coined "The Inducer"—sent pregnant Charlotteans into labor.

ALIÑO PIZZERIA
500 S. Main St., Ste. 401, Mooresville
The wood-fired pies at this spacious Mooresville spot are all 16 inches, so it's best to share with friends—and the long, family-style tables practically beg for it.

MAMA RICOTTA'S
601 S. Kings Drive, Ste. AA
Classic Italian entrees like lasagna and penne alla vodka tend to be the main attraction here, but don't miss out on the New Haven-style pizza.

EMMY SQUARED PIZZA
Multiple locations
The Detroit-style pizza menu is split between Reds (topped with sauce and mozzarella) and Whites (topped with just mozzarella), with the latter's Hot Chicken pie being a major hit.

THE JIMMY
2839 Selwyn Ave., Ste. X
You can get a traditional Margherita, but for something a bit more adventurous, try the Cacio de Roma, topped with provolone, mushrooms, and arugula.

INIZIO PIZZA NAPOLETANA
Multiple locations
This family-friendly spot serves Neapolitan pizzas that include a traditional Margherita pie and the just-quirky-enough pistachio-pesto pie.

GENO D'S PIZZA
224 E. 7th St.
The Jersey Shore-style pizza joint comes from father-and-daughter team Geno and Gena DiPaolo, and it serves rectangular Grandma-style pies.

CAPISHE: REAL ITALIAN KITCHEN
Multiple locations
This fast-casual joint slings Neapolitan pizzas that cook in less than 120 seconds.

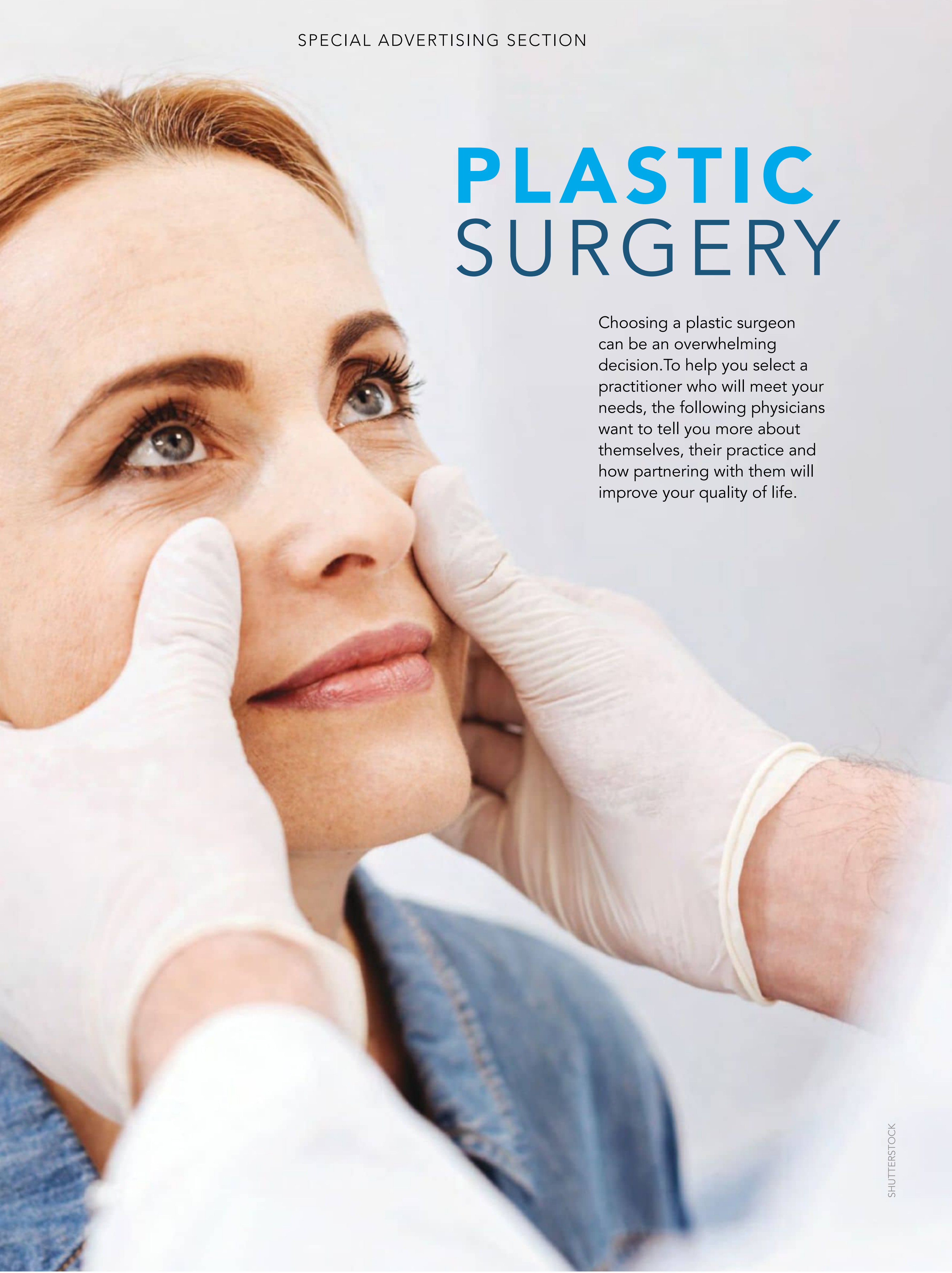
BIRD PIZZERIA
510 E. 15th St.
This Optimist Park spot prepares three kinds of pies—plain, vegan, and white—with your choice of nine toppings on charred crust.

ZEPEDDIE'S PIZZERIA
4516 Nations Crossing Road
The popular '90s pizza joint reopened more than two decades later in LoSo with a menu of New York- and Sicilian-style pizzas, plus calzones, strombolis, sandwiches, and salads.

ZÄMBIES
3204 N. Davidson St.
Sure, you can grab a slice for lunch, but Zämbies bills itself as a last stop when you're "stumbling home from the bars."

KING OF FIRE PIZZA
Multiple locations
What started as a food truck known for its wood-fired pizza now has brick-and-mortar restaurants in uptown and Clover, South Carolina.

ZIO
116 Middleton Drive
The pizza crust is crisp and tastefully charred, the tomato sauce is homemade and rich, and the herbs come from the patio garden.



PLASTIC SURGERY

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ABOUT THE PRACTICE: The top aesthetic destination of the South, Carolina Facial Plastics is led by double board-certified facial plastic surgeon Dr. Jonathan Kulbersh. With his team of cosmetic experts, a fully accredited surgery center, and a private recovery retreat all located in the heart of SouthPark, Carolina Facial Plastics is known for unparalleled and natural-looking results exclusively for the face.

OUR PHILOSOPHY: By focusing 100% on cosmetic treatments for the face, Dr. Kulbersh and his team perform surgical and non-surgical aesthetic techniques designed to fully enhance each patient's own unique attractiveness.

WHAT SETS US APART: Dr. Kulbersh honed his skills with the top plastic surgeons in Beverly Hills, including Dr. Paul Nassif from the TV series Botched, which laid the foundation for bringing the best global techniques to the South. Carolina Facial Plastics is the only SouthPark practice that has its own fully accredited surgery center and luxurious recovery retreat in the same building, providing patients with the highest level of care and comfort in a discreet, yet welcoming atmosphere. Dr. Kulbersh and his team of cosmetic experts utilize the latest and most advanced technology to deliver the best results possible to their patients. From surgical enhancements and lasers to injectables and microneedling, Carolina Facial Plastics offers an assortment of treatments to improve their patients' natural features.

WHAT'S NEW: Carolina Facial Plastics is excited to announce our continued growth with a new location, new treatments, and new expert providers Mischell Christmas RN, BSN and Rachel Tuschak, PA-C! We are proud to offer the latest advancements in regenerative aesthetics, including Ariessence®, EZGel®, Selphyller PRF EZ GEL®, and exosome therapy—cutting-edge solutions designed to stimulate natural collagen production for superior skin rejuvenation and volume restoration. Additionally, we are expanding our laser and light therapy offerings with BBL Heroic®, an advanced broadband light technology that targets stubborn pigmentation, redness, and photodamage with greater precision and comfort. With our expansion, we have welcomed new expert providers to enhance our commitment to top-tier aesthetic care. Stay tuned for more details as we continue to bring the most innovative treatments to our patients.

PRESSURE SYSTEM
- SYSTEM OFFLINE -
Manual Override Controlled from Mechanical Room
58:59

Depth, an escape room at Timed Out Escape on Community House Road in Charlotte.

WHISKEY
6-5-4
El Rey del Mundo
Real
MIDLETON
MONTAGUE
COUNTING on you
Not to touch!

The Under Pressure room at Key to Escape in Statesville takes players back to 1925.

PURE ESCAPISM

Charlotte's booming escape room scene mixes puzzles, theatrical sets, and time pressure. We went inside the labyrinth

By **GAVIN EDWARDS**

Photographs by
HERMAN NICHOLSON

This year, I have activated a beam of light that refracted through the gem on top of a staff to highlight a secret message painted on the floor.

I also have fended off a dragon by waving a wand and reciting an incantation that I had decoded.

I have deciphered a secret message from surveillance video and HVAC schematics to liberate extraterrestrials trapped in a government facility.

Each of these adventures happened in an escape room, which means I paid money to do them with a group of friends while a clock ticked. Escape rooms have boomed in the past decade. Each contains a set of puzzles; the goal is for a small group, usually three to 10, to solve them all within an hour to "escape" the room. (You're not literally locked in an escape room. If you need to step out for a bathroom break, you can.)

A good escape room feels immersive, like you've stepped into an Egyptian tomb or an airplane cockpit (or, at least, the movie versions of those places). Puzzles can involve interpreting wordplay, deciphering maps, or pouring water into a container to make a secret message bob to the top. You almost always need to search an escape room thoroughly—an important clue can be resting on a mantelpiece or hiding in a coat pocket. And sometimes, there's a magical moment when solving a puzzle unlocks a door to reveal another room ... with more puzzles.

People do escape rooms because they want to test their brains with something more challenging than a sudoku, crave the sensation of starring in a heist movie, or want something fun to do with friends for an hour before they go eat nachos. Occasionally, they have other motivations. Chris Burfield, who runs Timed Out Escape in the Whiteoak neighborhood with his wife, Tina, remembers a young woman who came in on a Friday night with four female friends.

"She booked the Illusion room, and they did the game," he says. "They needed a clue or two, but they got out and had a great time. And then we saw her book another room on the website that night." (Most escape room businesses host several different rooms under the same roof, for economies of scale: Timed Out has four.) "That's not unusual—but the weird thing was that she booked Illusion again."

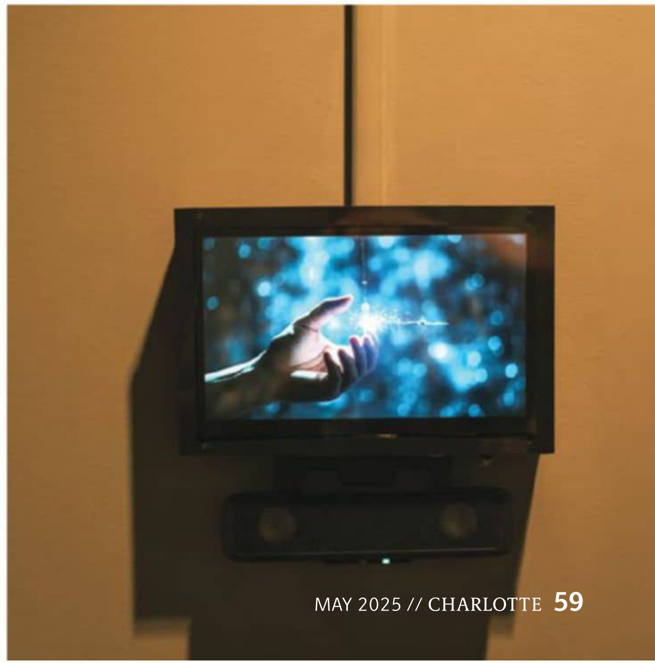
The next day, she showed up with five male friends, pretended it was her first time in the room, and dazzled her pals by solving one puzzle after another. "They all thought she was Einstein," Chris says. "We didn't sell her out." But her plan worked too well. Her friends were so impressed, they insisted on booking a different room right away. When they played it, they were baffled as to why she no longer had a cavalcade of brilliant insights.

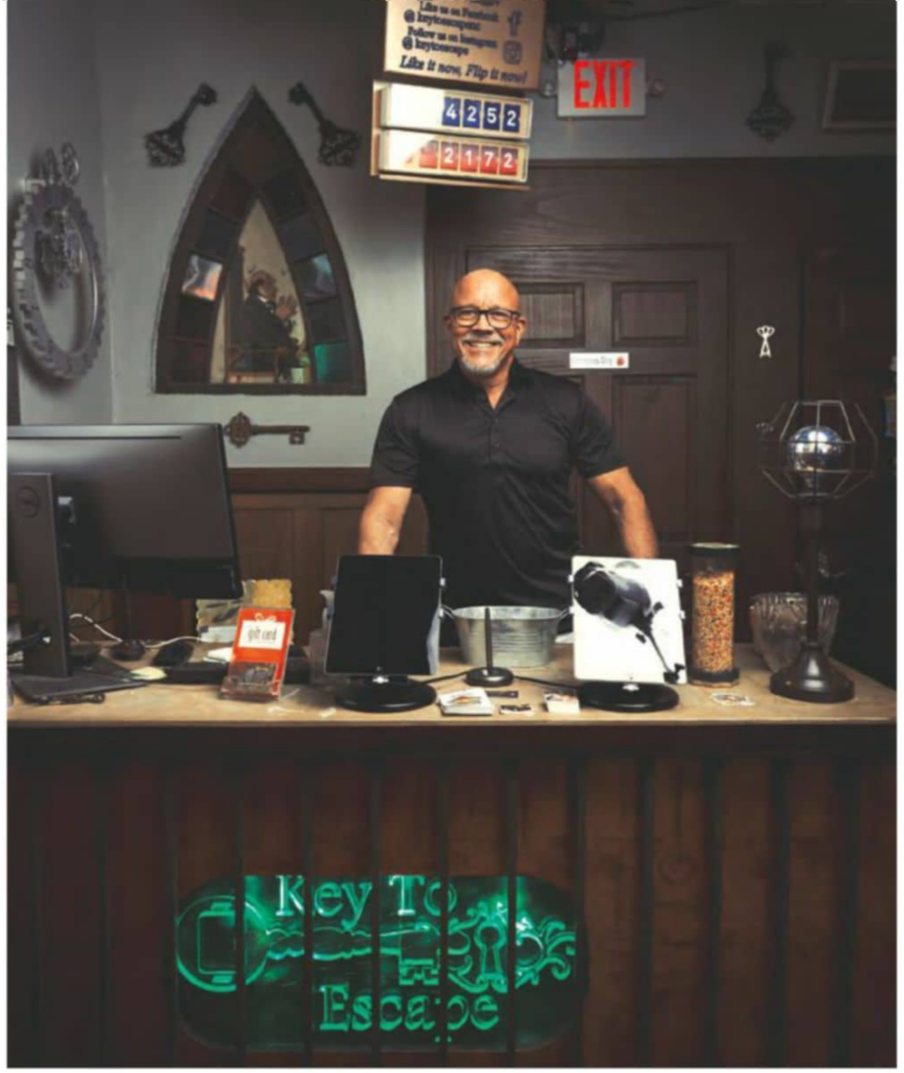
TIMED OUT
TIMED OUT
Chris and Tina Burfield of Timed Out Escape.

restrial
way
CORE SAMPLES: RADIATION TYPES

ALIEN LOGIC PANEL
INDICATOR LIGHTS
ON
OFF

Timed Out Escape guests can choose from four rooms, including one that takes you inside the alien research center at Area 51.





Roger Siegrist renovated a historic church into Key to Escape.

Escape rooms go at least as far back as 16th-century hedge mazes—Theseus versus the Minotaur was a high-stakes mythological escape room—but the modern version originated in Japan in 2007, when Takao Kato had the idea of making a physical version of a puzzle-oriented video game. They quickly became a trend, first as pop-up experiences, then as permanent installations, and spread across Asia and Europe. In 2012, the first escape room in the United States opened in San Francisco.

The watershed moment was 2016, when the number of American escape rooms grew ninefold in a single year. After some retrenching during the pandemic, more than 2,000 escape room locations now operate in the United States. In 2018, the Charlotte area had 11; now, twice as many do business within an hour's drive.

While there are a few escape room chains in Charlotte (like Escapology, which features branded rooms that are authorized tie-ins to Batman and Scooby-Doo), escape rooms are still basically mom-and-pop stores. They're profitable enough that people can make viable businesses out of them but not so lucrative that venture capital has swallowed the industry.

Some financials: Most escape rooms charge $30 to $40 per person and require a minimum party of three for an hourlong adventure. A successful escape room facility can gross approximately $300,000 to $500,000 in a year, roughly half of which is profit. The second-biggest expense is usually rent, which is why many escape rooms are in warehouses on the edge of town or in slightly grotty corporate parks.

The biggest expense is building a new room and making it sturdy enough to survive being prodded and manhandled by hundreds of visitors. Depending on the amount of electronics and secret panels and whiz-bang props, that typically costs between $30,000 and $50,000. But some people go all-in: "I've got $220,000 in one room, Twist of Oz," says Roger Siegrist, who owns Key to Escape in Statesville. "Unless you put that in a room, you're not competitive."

So why do people start escape rooms?

"We love all things horror," says Tom Watson, who runs the spooky rooms at Nocturne Adventures with his wife, Nicole, in the basement of their home in Hickory. "You've got to do escape rooms because you love them—behind the scenes, the majority of the business is admin and paperwork."

"I spent my life being involved in youth ministry, but when you get wrinkles, you age out of that," Ken McCoy of Waxhaw Escape says with a chuckle. He and his wife, Jeannie, started their room "so we can pay our bills into our dotage." They didn't have much experience with escape rooms, so they partnered with designers based in Novosibirsk, Russia: "They're really good at making interactive props and knowing how many puzzles need to happen per space to make it a one-hour experience."

"Our mantra is 'where history meets mystery,'" says Siegrist, who established Key to Escape in a historic church. He discovered that church in 2004, when he rode his bicycle from Charlotte to Seattle and a local newspaper then located in the building wrote an article about him. He and his wife, Kim, opened the room in part because people said there was nothing to do in Statesville. Now, they get visitors from Europe who come to their small town just to play their rooms.

I haven't opened an escape room (yet), but I've designed puzzles and watched people solve them. That experience has taught me the importance of playing fair, laying out enough clues so they don't have to flail about in frustration. It's also given me a healthy respect for combined brainpower in puzzle-solving: When people talk out loud about a strange problem instead of staring at it silently, pretty soon, one person's half-formed idea will lead a friend to the solution. I love that dynamic—which is why I recruit friends to join me in escape rooms so we can jam on absurd enigmas together.

People in the escape room industry sometimes describe rooms as being "gen-1," "gen-2," and "gen-3." The boundaries between them are fuzzy. But generally speaking, the trend is for more technology, more immersive sets, more special effects, and better puzzles. Many rooms are still woefully underlit, but at least it's relatively uncommon these days that one needs to find secret messages with blacklight flashlights.

"I haven't seen this in a while," says puzzle designer and escape room enthusiast Eric Berlin, "so hopefully room designers have finally abandoned it: having to go through a cedar chest or laundry hamper filled with random articles of clothing in search of a key hidden somewhere in there." Puzzle designer Trip Payne gave that unenjoyable challenge the nickname of "crap mountain."

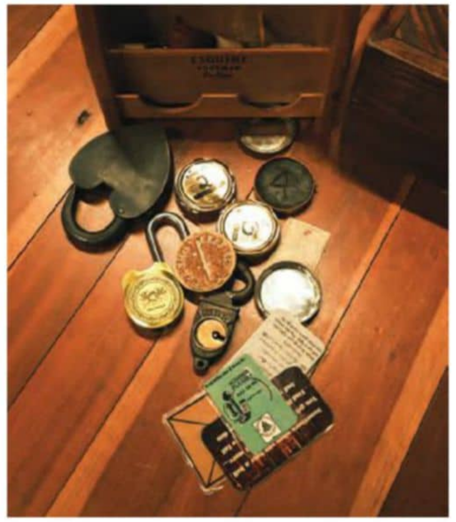
Escape rooms are seasonal businesses, but the season depends on the location. Rooms on the Outer Banks rely on summer tourists. In Charlotte, the peak of the season is December 28: That's when families who have spent a week confined to the same house for holiday celebrations get the bright idea of leaving the house ... and spending some time together in an even smaller room. Sometimes, that works out great; other times, solving puzzles with time pressure just exacerbates the stress.

Soon, the Burfields plan to retire a room that contains a particularly fiendish puzzle—they stress that if they were doing it over, they wouldn't design it to work the same way. It requires four people at different stations to follow directions. If they pay attention and listen to each other, it takes only 60 seconds. But if anyone makes a mistake, they all have to start over. Some groups start screaming at each other.

"You see some couples leave, and they're walking 10 feet apart from each other," Tina Burfield confides. "We nicknamed the puzzle 'The Divorce Attorney's Friend.'"

Escape rooms' peak seasons vary depending on where they are. In Charlotte, it's just after Christmas, when families long to leave the house. This is the Top Shelf Elf room at Key to Escape.

The idea behind the Under Pressure room at Key to Escape: A hidden whiskey still threatens to explode, and you have to find the hidden valve key to release the pressure and save the town from ruin.



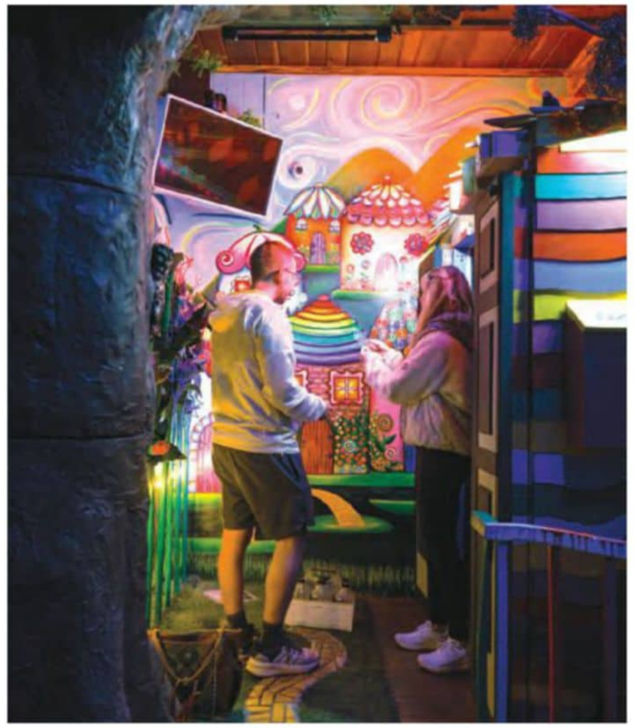
Sometimes the concepts work, and sometimes they don't. The Burfields plan to replace the submarine-themed Depth room at Timed Out Escape because customers don't like its narrative gimmick.

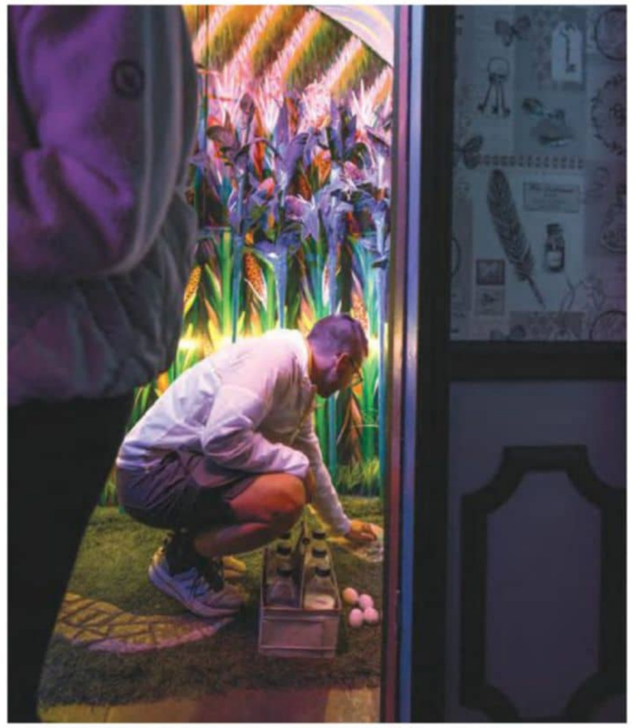
GENE SPLICER

> "You see some couples leave, and they're walking 10 feet apart from each other. We nicknamed the puzzle 'The Divorce Attorney's Friend.'"
>
> —TINA BURFIELD, TIMED OUT ESCAPE

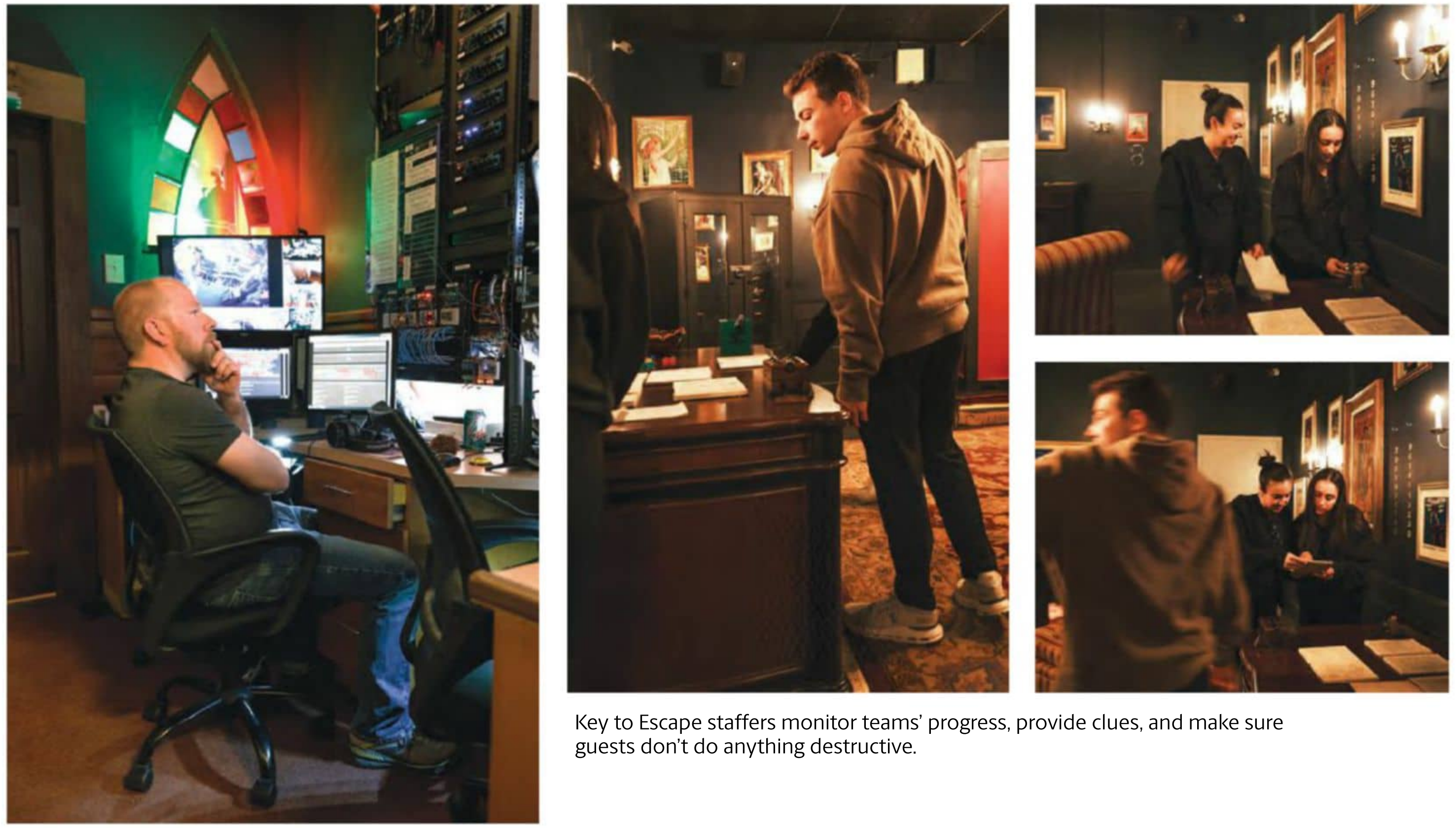
Another room at Timed Out Escape: Precinct, which takes place in a run-down police station.

How much do escape room operators have to spend? Depends on the operator: Siegrist spent $220,000 on the Twist of Oz room at Key to Escape.





The control room at Timed Out.



Key to Escape staffers monitor teams' progress, provide clues, and make sure guests don't do anything destructive.

The Timed Out control room looks like a cross between a NASA workstation and a car-rental center's break room. Two large monitors on one wall have 24 surveillance-camera feeds, evenly divided among four escape rooms. On a Saturday afternoon, three active escape rooms are being watched by three Timed Out employees, each seated in front of a large Mac desktop screen with customized software that tracks their group's progress. Behind them is a microwave and a mini fridge with bottled water.

The shaggy Luca Conti, 18, monitors Precinct, set in an abandoned police station; the Kool Aid-red-haired Finch Hackenberg, also 18, watches Illusion, set in the office of a stage magician. Ian Garner, 39, sports facial hair and multiple tattoos; he has the unflappable calm of a former schoolteacher (which he is). He watches a father shepherd three small children through 51, a room about alien research in Area 51—until he realizes that the father, who has never done an escape room, is overwhelmed by the process of supervising the kids while he tries to solve the puzzles. Garner gets out of his seat and lets himself into the room so he can walk them through it. "This is a lot of energy for one adult," he tells them, "so I thought I'd come in and join you."

Usually, the monitors provide clues only via text messages sent to a video screen in the room, and only when they're asked for one. Each has a microphone handy in case employees need to warn a team away from doing something dangerous or destructive. But they all closely watch the clock—the goal is for teams to have a good time, and if that means ladling out clues more liberally toward the end of the hour so people can have the satisfaction of completing the room, that's what will happen.

I sit next to Hackenberg, who is watching a group (a mix of adults and tweens) exhibit what she calls "goldfish brain"—they will solve a puzzle that yields a code, then forget to see if they can use that code to unlock another puzzle because they spot a different intriguing object. "I run a D&D campaign for some of my high school friends," she says, with a mixture of exasperation and affection. "It reminds me a bit of this, because they have very few brain cells."

She glances at her clock. The group is running behind schedule. "This is a situation I might not be able to get them out of," she murmurs. Then one of the kids has a crucial insight that involves a multicolored scarf. "Thank you, small child," she says, "for having critical thinking skills."

Tina Burfield is busy at the front desk, checking people in and making sure they sign waivers. She's spent her fair share of hours sitting at the control panels, watching customers—and sometimes paying more attention to their behavior than they do. She remembers one male customer who booked the same room four weeks in a row, in each case with a different date.

"He wasn't slamming the room," Tina says, meaning that he let his dates solve the puzzles—he didn't try to impress them by being a (fake) escape room wizard. Apparently, he thought the room was a congenial venue for a first date. But his fourth time through, he called his date by the wrong name when he asked her if she wanted to grab dinner. Tina could only watch on the monitor, horrified, as the woman's face froze. At the end of the hour, Tina debriefed them—until the date stalked out. The man looked at Tina, confused. She informed him, "Maybe Betsy was upset that you called her Caroline."

The Burfields have been married for 27 years. They previously worked corporate jobs in financial services and opened their escape room around the time other people might have been thinking of retiring. They love games and puzzles, but when they played their first escape room eight years ago, a room called Shipwrecked at a now-defunct Charlotte venue called Codescape, something clicked: "We failed at the room, but we thought it was the coolest thing ever," Chris says. "We've tried to play every room we can since then."

Chris handles most of the technology; Tina deals with the marketing and paperwork; and they design the rooms together, encouraging the staff to contribute. They've seen local rooms come and go—some people aren't ready to run a small business, they say, while others don't want to think about marketing and hope merely opening their doors will do the job. But the local escape room community is collegial, partially because they all count on each other to convert new customers. People who discover that they enjoy solving escape rooms are likely to check out a variety of escape room venues, but somebody who has a bad time is unlikely to try a different room. So when an escape room venue shakes out a new room, most testers will be employees of other escape rooms.

Timed Out is in an upscale minimall next to a tapas restaurant and an organic grocery store; their rent is higher than many other escape room venues, but the location, near office buildings, means they can earn money by hosting corporate workshops during the day. The rooms have more technology than most and less emphasis on immersion than some, but the Burfields are comfortable playing to their strengths. One thing they're particularly good at is taking feedback and finding ways to improve: They're about to swap out a submarine-themed room, Depth, because of a narrative gimmick that customers didn't like. Groups were divided into two halves in two smaller rooms before solving puzzles that let them reunite in a larger room—but some friends hated the idea of being split up, even briefly.

Tina checks in on the control room and warns the monitors that she just scheduled a walk-in party. I ask everyone what they've learned about humanity by watching people solve escape rooms.

"Sometimes the most obvious things are not where the mind goes," Garner says.

"Most of our customers are fantastic," Tina says, "but after COVID, I've noticed that people aren't as forgiving, and a lot of them don't know how to socialize anymore."

Hackenberg says she's not interested in having children, but she's much more impressed by them now: "Sometimes kids get things quickly that don't register with groups of eight adults."

Conti smiles. "Respectfully," he says, "I've learned to maintain a level of skepticism when people say they've done an escape room before."

Contributing editor GAVIN EDWARDS designed puzzles with the Palindrome team for the 2022 MIT Mystery Hunt.

Skaters practice at APB Skatepark.

RUSTY WILLIAMS

BOB
BEST OF THE BEST
AWARDS

By **TESS ALLEN, TAYLOR BOWLER, GAVIN EDWARDS,**
AMANDA PAGLIARINI HOWARD,
GREG LACOUR, *and* **KAYLEIGH RULLER**

Photographs by
HERMAN NICHOLSON, PETER TAYLOR,
and **RUSTY WILLIAMS**

EVERY MAY, we reconnect with our good friend BOB, and the guy just keeps changing on us. A couple of years ago, he was into artisanal doughnuts, acai bowls, car detailers, and custom jewelers. This year, trend-chaser that he is, he's all about brunch boards, THC seltzers, disc golf, plant-based frozen desserts that taste like something other than siliconized caulk, and, of course, tinned fish. He's all over the place. But, like his city, he grows, diversifies, and changes with the seasons and years. So do we.

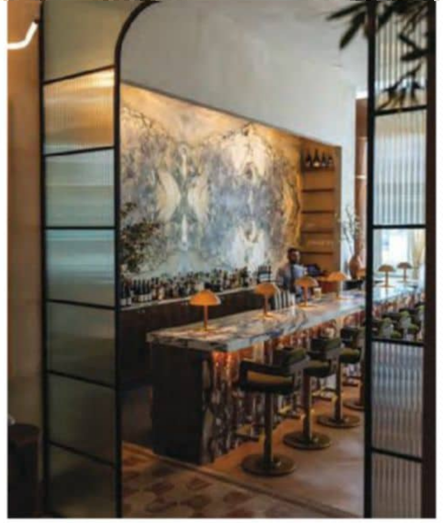
EAT

PETER TAYLOR

Accidental Baker:

Matt Cabana

Matt Cabana was a tennis pro and corporate banker until December 2023, when he accidentally became a baker. His wife, who can't eat gluten, struggled to find baked goods in Charlotte that didn't taste gluten-free. So, Matt says, he started making them himself. Family and friends encouraged him to turn it into a business, and he launched The Accidental Baker from his home kitchen. Today, customers can order gluten-free breads, pastries, cookies, cakes, biscuits, and more for pickup in Oakwold. (Walk-in service not available.) *4416 Monroe Road, Ste. D*



PETER TAYLOR

New Restaurant:

Albertine

The decor is clutch, the service top-notch, and the food absurdly good. But we'd expect nothing less from Joe and Katy Kindred, the couple behind Kindred, Milkbread, and Hello, Sailor. They opened this Mediterranean-meets-Southern restaurant in September on the ground floor of the Duke Energy Building uptown, and it might be their finest work. The atmosphere feels luxurious and regal with custom millwork, brass accents, and banquettes upholstered in plush velvet. The menu features a stellar lineup of dips, spreads, chilled seafood, and desserts. Most dishes are meant to be shared, but forks may fly. *525 S. Tryon St., Ste. 125*

Secret Menu Item:

Papi Queso's Spaghetti Melt

You won't see it posted anywhere on the menu. But order this dish, and the cashier will give you a knowing smile that says, "I'm picking up what you're putting down." It's spaghetti-meets-grilled cheese-meets-garlic bread—and they'll throw in some ricotta beef meatballs if you want to be *really* extra. *1115 N. Brevard St., Ste. 2*

Breakfast Behemoth:

The Crunkleton's Tomahawk Brunch Board

This 42-ounce bone-in ribeye is sliced and served on a platter packed alongside biscuits and gravy, fingerling potato hash, and four sunny-side up eggs. Bring a few friends, order it for the table, and feast. *1957 E. 7th St.*

Mexican Street Corn:

Maíz Agua Sal's Elote

This Wesley Heights spot serves the charred corn *off* the cob and tossed in a bowl with spices, mayo, red salsa, and cotija cheese. It comes with a basket of house-made chips. But it makes a spectacular taco garnish, too, so try to save a few scoops for your entree. *1018 Jay St., Ste. 110*

Plant-Based Frozen Dessert:

Really Not Ice Cream

Full offense, but most vegan ice cream tastes like keister candy. This stuff does not. You don't even have to be vegan—or even a health-conscious individual—to vibe its flavor. Key Lime Pie, Mint Chip, Blackberry, and Belgian Chocolate are all bangers, but their greatest hit is Vanilla Oreo. Owner Adam Duke sells it at local farmers markets, and it's also on the menu at Bang Bang Burgers South End, Free Range Brewing, and Sweet Lew's Barbecue. *@reallynoticecream*

Big-Ass Dessert:

Union Barbecue's Big Deborah

The barbecue here slaps, and so does this dessert. Owner Holden Sasser and sous chef Chase Young came up with this supersized take on a Little Debbie Oatmeal Creme Pie. Nicknamed the Big Deborah, she's about as big as your head. Track down this food truck and try it for yourself. *@union.barbecue*

Pig and Fig Pizza:

Flight

This 10-inch pie arrives fresh out of the wood-burning oven on a wooden pizza peel—and it gets everything right: blistered edges, bubbling cheese, and an even distribution of sweet and savory flavors. It's topped with prosciutto, goat cheese, arugula, fig jam, pickled red onion, and balsamic drizzle, so you've got all your food groups covered. *1949 E. 7th St.*

Caviar and Potato Chip Pairing:

Bar à Vins

You'd expect full-bodied pours and a menu of vino-adjacent snacks at this neighborhood wine bar. But a bag of Lay's on a platter with tart creme fraiche? Just go with it. One scoop of those briny, fanciful orbs paired with a swig of bubbles is a testament to the magnificent union of salt and fat. It's science, really. *3206 N. Davidson St.*

Tacos:

Tacos de Trompo at Tacos El Regio

"Regio" is slang for someone or something from Monterrey, Mexico, where the locals refer to pork al pastor tacos as "tacos de trompo." (A "trompo" is the vertical, spinning rotisserie the pork is roasted on.) This humble eatery, in a shopping center off Albemarle Road, uses an adobo marinade that tints the pork bright red. It's sliced off the trompo and placed atop corn tortillas; you can add fresh lime juice, red or green salsa, chopped onion, and cilantro to taste. *8829 E. W.T. Harris Blvd.*

Bar Snack:

Warm Cookies at The Ugly

You wouldn't expect a dive known for its cheap highballs, photo booth, and chilled Negronis to serve the best bar snack in town. Prepare to have your preconceptions shattered. This NoDa bar serves warm cookies that pair surprisingly well with wallet-friendly suds. *424 E. 36th St., Ste. 2*

Pour-Over:

Sancocho de Mariscos at MaBí Cocina Tropical

The team behind Sabor Latin Street Grill and Three Amigos opened MaBí Cocina Tropical last summer in NoDa. Its version of sancocho—one of the Dominican Republic's national dishes—is a stew of red snapper, shrimp, veggies, avocado, coconut rice, and a broth you pour yourself. *416 E. 36th St.*

Lesser-Known Food Hall:

Alley 51

It opened in May 2024 as an addition to the new Super G Mart that anchors The Centrum, a sprawling shopping center in south Charlotte. Among the multicolored chairs and globe lanterns in its dining areas are (as of this writing) 14 vendors that serve a wide array of Asian street foods: sushi from Yume; Tteokbokki, or Korean spicy rice cakes, from Mukja; Lechon Kawali, or Filipino fried pork belly, from Manila Grill; and many, many other delights. *10500 Centrum Parkway, Pineville*

Bagels That Went Viral Before They Even Reached Charlotte:

PopUp Bagels

On Jan. 5, viral New York City bagel shop PopUp Bagels posted to Instagram: "My next trip to Charlotte won't just be to see our cousins ... Excited to announce the first chapter in our Southeast expansion plans!!! Permanent Bagel Shop Coming Spring 2025." There was a rush of bagel-based excitement on Charlotte social media following the announcement. We all eagerly await more info. *@popupbagels*

Kid-Friendly Food Truck:

Nacho Average Food Truck

When you're on the go with hangry kids, a great food truck is like a desert oasis. Nacho Average Truck shines in its shareables, slinging piles of nachos in varieties like Buffalo Chicken, Beef Supreme, and Chicken Enchilada. *Mobile*

Sandwich:

The Riverside at Schreiber's on Rye

Most of us beeline right to the Reuben or pastrami at a Jewish deli. Further down the menu, though, the mighty Riverside awaits with its stacks of roasted turkey breast, Swiss cheese, slaw, and Russian dressing on rye. Add a cup of Opa's Matzo Ball Soup for a complete—and wholly comforting—midday meal. *1115 N. Brevard St., Ste. 14.*

BOBLIGHT:

CHARLOTTE RESTAURANTS WE'VE LOST

Restaurant closings are an unfortunate reality in any city, but the last year has been particularly hard on Charlotte's culinary community. Many faced staffing challenges, escalating rents, and rising food costs. Legacy restaurants like **ZADA JANE'S**, **FENWICK'S**, **JJ'S RED HOTS**, and **LETTY'S ON SHAMROCK** all ended their runs. **HARPER'S RESTAURANT**, known for an affordable menu of burgers, ribs, and wood-fired pizzas, closed after more than three decades in SouthPark when the landlord decided to demolish the building and replace it with a bank. (How Charlotte is that?)

NOCHE BRUTA, the pop-up that turned the Hex Coffee space into a full-service restaurant at night, struggled to find diners to embrace the dual concept. Other beloved restaurants that have appeared on this magazine's 50 Best list—**FUTO BUTA**, **HAYMAKER**, and **THE GOOD WURST COMPANY**—closed, too. But as any Charlottean knows, the city's food scene moves at full tilt, so we know something new will take their places. **ROCKSALT**, the seafood restaurant in Park Road Shopping Center, will reopen as Bossy Beulah's later this year. **VOLO RISTORANTE** in Myers Park will become Yassou Greek Cuisine. **THE BOTTLE TREE** in Belmont is rebranding as Kaya Gastrolounge. By the time this issue lands, there will almost certainly be a few more.

Authentic Enough for the Gringos:

Casa del Tequila

This Ballantyne spot serves authentic and traditional Mexican cuisine but can still cater to the most basic chips-and-salsa seeker. Get a Chicken and Cheese Quesadilla alongside a fishbowl-sized margarita adorned with umbrellas, flamingos, and a blinking neon light (seriously). Or try the Mojarra Frita Fish entree and sip on a Cazuela, a traditional Latin American cocktail served in a shallow terra cotta dish. *14815 Ballantyne Village Way, Ste. 155*

Dumplings:

Pho Good Time Asian Fusion

Order the Rainbow Dumpling Set, and you'll get a bamboo steamer full of neatly folded pouches. Each one is color-coded with natural dye, so you'll know which flavor you're about to eat. *2410 Park Road*

Flaming Cheese:

Saganaki from Hellenic Greek Kitchen

Cheese tastes better after it's been set on fire. Hellenic—a 2-year-old establishment just off the Bland Street light rail stop—starts with a rectangle of firm, salty Halloumi cheese, fries it, and serves it hot in a cast-iron skillet with lemon juice. Then your server pours a shot of whiskey over the cheese and lights it; once the whiskey burns off, you plate and eat it with pita triangles. Despite its Japanese-sounding name, saganaki is a traditional Greek dish—although the flambéed version originated in the now-closed Parthenon restaurant in Chicago. *1436 South Blvd.*

PETER TAYLOR

IMBIBE

Printed Espresso Martini:

Sea Level NC

Your cocktail is your canvas when you order Sea Level's Espresso Martini. Just scan the QR code, upload an image (or select a pre-designed one), and show your server the number on your screen. They'll prepare the vodka-and-cold-brew-based martini, then use a Ripple printer to top it with your "ink" design, made from plant-based extracts. Bottoms up! *129 E. 5th St.*

PETER TAYLOR

PETER TAYLOR

Pickle Cocktail:

The Pittsburgh at Blue Door

This South End cocktail bar opened last fall with a menu inspired by the great American road trip, and each drink is named after a different city. The Pittsburgh starts with an acidic homemade pickle brine and gin, softly heats up with long pepper and lime, and rounds out with earthy Suze and Cocchi Americano. Mixologist Mike Guzman came up with it after a drunken evening with his friends in Pittsburgh, which is famous for its pickle festival. *1508 S. Mint St.*

Free Wine Tasting:

Wednesday Nights at Substrate

This Optimist Park bar pours wine on the house every Wednesday from 5 to 7 p.m. Each week has a different theme—wines from Austria or Germany, for example, or from a specific producer. Owner Matt Green says he wants to introduce Charlotteans to wines they may not be used to, like sparkling, bottle-fermented pét-nats and full-bodied orange wines, made with grapes that keep their skins during fermentation. When it's warm, sippers bask in the sun on the breezy front patio. Substrate's vinyl collection, proximity to Optimist Hall, and checkerboard tables don't hurt, either. *512 E. 15th St.*

Beer That Should Not Be Good But Is:

Origin Story at Lower Left Brewing

Charlotte breweries make some superb coffee beers. The Wake Up Porter from Birdsong and Ground Up Coffee Stout from Lenny Boy come to mind. But a coffee-infused New England IPA with hops that add tropical and fruity notes? Alex Shoenthal, Lower Left's founder and head brewer, makes this seasonal brew every fall with coffee from Night Swim, conveniently located across the street from the brewery and taproom. He uses a different single-origin coffee every year. (Consistency's overrated.) A coffee IPA should not be drinkable. Origin Story is—and it tastes like nothing else. *4528 Nations Crossing Road*

Low-Altitude Rooftop:

Burial Beer

A great rooftop bar needn't be some downtown crow's nest 30 stories up. Sometimes the view's better from closer to the ground. Burial's whitewashed second story is a splendid spot to sip a cold beer on a warm afternoon and watch the denizens of Plaza Midwood amble by. *1214 Thomas Ave.*

Tribute to Understatement:

Blinders Sports Lounge

Its owners bill this South End sports bar as "the sports lounge with a big-ass screen." How big is this ass? It's 60 by 15 feet—850 square feet total, which would rent for about $3,000 if it was a studio apartment. It hangs 8 feet off the ground and weighs about 10,000 pounds. Cost: $1.5 million. And that's just the centerpiece of a Vegas-adjacent experience that includes a patio and plush banquette seating. Y'know, just a humble little neighborhood joint. *225 W. Tremont Ave.*

Coffee Shop That Hands Out "Lucky Ducks":

Backyard Brew

Approach Backyard Brew's counter-service window on the covered front porch of a historic house in Dilworth. Co-owner and roaster TK Khalil greets you with a smile and, just for fun, hands you a teeny, plastic, yellow "lucky duck." "We're not a coffee shop, he says. "We're a make-you-happy shop!" You can show up in a bad mood, but you won't leave in one. TK's friendliness is as warm as the Turkish coffees and Banana Bread Lattes that Backyard brews. *1218 East Blvd.*

New Neighborhood Hang:

Copperhead Social Club

This NoDa bar, which opened in October, aims to be as much like a friend's home as possible. It's a house, for one thing, with vintage arcade games, a cozy yard with picnic tables, a front porch with ashtrays, and bric-a-brac scattered throughout. Hungry? You can order burgers, fries, and wings from the immobilized food truck out back. Friends and co-owners Alex Beebe and Julian Billings had operated Pepperbox Doughnuts & Coffee shop here since 2021. But, in the face of rising costs and declining sales, they closed last May to make way for this hangout. *2810 N. Davidson St.*

BOBLIGHT: FOOD POP-UPS

When Charlotteans return from a trip to Charleston or New York, they want cutting-edgier dishes or chefier-driven restaurants. Often, they return defeated. But they're just looking in the wrong places.

These types of spots exist in Charlotte but not in brick and mortar. The city's food pop-ups, from roaming food trucks to nomadic sandwich makers, serve some of the most compelling bites in the city. **DISGRUNTLED RONIN**'s sandwiches burst at the seams. **CHUTNEY CAT**'s chicken is alive with Tandoori spice. **DULCE DREAMS CAFE**'s conchas are pillow-soft. **ASHIK BAKERY**'s croissants play with saffron and lemongrass. Their diverse cuisines and cult followings are a testament to building something from the ground up—and without a restaurant group. The pop-up crews collaborate with each other, like Kimmy Bazan of **EL VENENO** and Holden Sasser of **UNION BARBECUE** truck, who blend tacos and barbecue. Even places with physical locations, like **MARINA'S TAPAS**, are doing pop-ups and collabs at wine bars.

N.A.R.C.
NON-ALCOHOLIC RESIDENT CULTURE
LIME + SEA SALT

NA Beer:

N.A.R.C. at Resident Culture Brewing

Young people today don't drink as much as young people of the past. How do local craft brewers respond? By raising a glass to NA beers: Resident Culture, one of Charlotte's most innovative breweries, unveiled its N.A.R.C. (Non-Alcoholic Resident Culture) line in early 2024. In October, its IPA won the gold medal for Pale Non-Alcohol Beer at the Great American Beer Festival in Denver, Colorado. The line includes Lime & Sea Salt and Hop Water flavors as well, and they're refreshing, regret-free alternatives to both beer and soda. *2101 Central Ave.*

Small Brewery Co-Run by a Cattle Dog Named Gumbo:

Keepsake Brewery

In a city where breweries are constantly expanding (in more ways than one), it's refreshing to visit the little brewery that sticks to the basics. The cozy German-style taproom, which opened in February 2024, has white walls and mismatched antique chairs and tables. The names of Keepsake's four flagship beers—and maybe one seasonal or a wine by the glass—are scrawled on an antique mirror above the unfussy draft tower. Co-owner Bobby Myers learned how to brew in Berlin, and what he pours is worth the drive to Gastonia. Even better: Bobby and his wife and co-owner, Katherine, run the brewery alongside their "little helper," a Catahoula leopard dog named Gumbo. Look for him tucked into a bar-side bed. *211 Columbia St., Gastonia*

Chai Window:

The Chai Window at Twenty Two West

Art studio Twenty Two West added a walk-up Chai Window last year to the side of its chartreuse historic bungalow on The Plaza. The silky chai is served hot, iced, popsicle-d, or in an ice cream sammie—and with a fresh flower on the side. How freaking cute is that? *2338 The Plaza*

HERMAN NICHOLSON

HERMAN NICHOLSON

FIVE FLOWERS
ROSÉ LEMONADE
ROSÉ LEMONADE COOLER
HEMP-INFUSED SPARKLING NON-ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGE
12 OZ (355ml)
5MG CBD

Locally Made THC Seltzer:

Five Flowers

Cannabis-infused drinks are great for those who want a buzz without the hangover. They're also a solid entry point for the cannabis-curious who might not want to smoke or deal with the time commitments of an edible product. Local brand Five Flowers, specifically their grapefruit flavor, is the best-tasting THC seltzer we've tried. At 5 milligrams of THC and only 20 calories per can, it's a smart first-seltzer experience. It's also delightful as a low-cal mixer for those who really want to lean in. *drinkfiveflowers.com*

Cannabis Consumption Lounge:

Happy Camper

The dispensary at 2017 N. Davidson St. (across from The Hobbyist) and consumption lounge at 3100 N. Davidson St. (next to Haberdish) have become one—er, two—of the city's most popular places for THC products and, if you want to hang out, their effects. By the time you read this, the Happy Camper folks expect to have united the two in a new, larger location: a house across from Heist Brewery and Benny Pennello's. They plan to host food trucks and events, too. *2918 N. Davidson St.*

Pap Pap's
Salted Lager

Stealth Beer:

Pap Pap's Salted Lager at Fonta Flora Brewery

Another pale lager. Big deal. But you sip and notice: Wow, this is quite refreshing. Is it the hint of "ancient Appalachian sea salt"? You check the can—says here it's made with 91% local ingredients. Pap Pap's is a Dortmunder, a German lager style known for its crispness and amenity to food, and the quality of this particular brew's ingredients makes it one of our favorite quaffs. Thank goodness (and underground aquifers) that Morganton-based Fonta Flora saw fit to open a Charlotte taproom. *1115 N. Brevard St. (Optimist Hall), Ste. D*

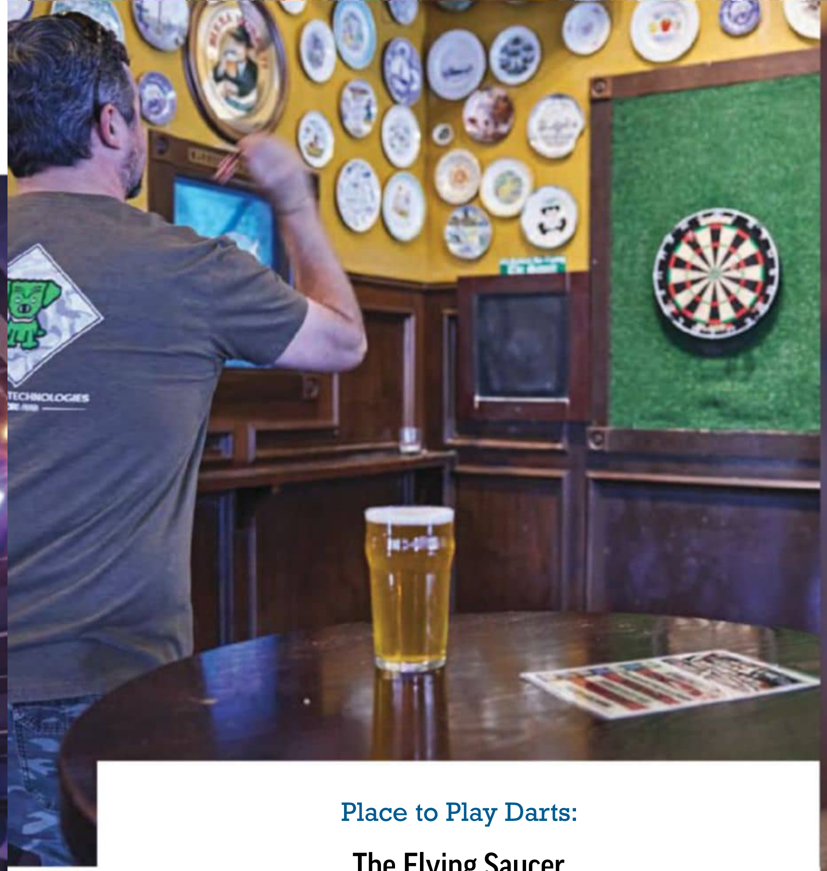
EXPLORE

Museum Revamp:

Sullenberger Aviation Museum

The former Carolinas Aviation Museum reopened last summer after five years and a $30 million redevelopment. Along with new facilities and exhibitions, the museum was renamed after Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger, the pilot who safely landed US Airways Flight 1549 in the Hudson River in January 2009. The Charlotte-bound plane, which carried 155 passengers, lost power to both engines after takeoff from LaGuardia Airport in New York City when it flew into a flock of geese. The Airbus A320 is part of the museum's immersive *Miracle on the Hudson* exhibit, which is pivotal to its mission to educate the public about aviation history, safety, and science. *4108 Minuteman Way*

RUSTY WILLIAMS



Place to Play Darts:

The Flying Saucer

Ah, yes. Brilliant. A proper pub for a proper pint and a proper darts match with a mate. The designated nook has ample railings on each side for your pints. The boards are the genuine article: Winmau Blade 6s, none of this plastic nonsense. You're in a University City shopping center, not a pub in Sussex, but you get over that after a couple of drafts and a bullseye or two. *9605 N. Tryon St., Ste. A*

Urban Refuge:

Latta Park

This 31-acre emerald in the Queen City's crown is easy to miss, a winding strip of oak-shaded trails hemmed in by some of Charlotte's busiest roads and its largest hospital. But it's a lovely and convenient spot for older folks to enjoy a midday stroll or picnic, young ballers to hoop on the Hornets-themed outdoor basketball court, and kids to frolic at the splash pad. *601 E. Park Ave.*

Regional City's Development to Watch:

Monroe

The 2018 opening of the Monroe Expressway eased the 30-mile drive from Charlotte, and spillover from the larger city has set Monroe up as a small city primed for growth. Monroe's city government offers grants and other financial incentives to draw businesses and events to its historic downtown. In recent years, bars, restaurants, and retail shops have opened, and a social district established in 2021 allows outdoor alcohol consumption in the city center.

Pickleball Coach:

Wynn Johnson at The Dinkery

Up your pickleball game or learn to have more fun playing with lessons from the guy determined to make the sport cool. Wynn is most often at Freedom Park but will travel. *thedinkery.club*

Colorful Residency:

Residency Music Experience

Musical theater kids, this one's for you: one room, one piano, and a bunch of strangers singing songs that fall under a theme (Taylor Swift, Emo Night, etc.). The lights are dim, and glow sticks glow. *@residencyclt*

New Greenway:

Long Creek Greenway, Phase 3

Mecklenburg County has stepped up its greenway construction, having opened 5 miles' worth in 2024 and planned 16 more. One of the more welcome projects should be open by now: the final stretch of the Long Creek Greenway, a 7-mile meander west from Interstate 77 just south of Huntersville to Oakdale Road in northwest Charlotte. The full greenway blends elevated pedestrian bridges with a widened trail to connect neighborhoods, and stream improvements along the route are designed to soak up floods and preserve adjacent wetlands. *Parking: Northcrest Shopping Center, 9841 Northlake Centre Parkway*

RUSTY WILLIAMS

Zone for Zoomies:

Swaney Pointe Dog Park

We visit on a crisp Valentine's Day. The sun filters through the pines and oaks at this end of Ramsey Creek Park and lands on a small pack of good dogs and their well-behaved humans. A brindle pit bull approaches, orange tennis ball in his mouth, then a brindle Frenchie with one floppy ear. The four-legged potato scratches the pine needle-covered ground, sniffs, and trots away. Nearby Lake Norman may contribute to this atmosphere of friendly curiosity. A vizsla hops onto a nearby picnic table and inserts her snout into a navy-blue tote. "Naya, no!" calls her owner. "Get out of there!" *18441 Nantz Road, Cornelius*

Demoted NFL Color Analyst:

Greg Olsen

For two seasons, the longtime Panthers tight end and pediatric heart patient advocate was Fox Sports' first-string color commentator for NFL broadcasts. Then some guy named Brady came along and relegated him to backup status. Olsen expressed frustration with the network's decision in an interview with The Athletic before Super Bowl LIX in February—for which Brady, not Olsen, was in the broadcast booth. You're still in our starting lineup, Greg. (We may still be salty over Super Bowl XXXVIII.)

Display of Perseverance:

Ballantyne Ridge High School Football Team

For the school's inaugural year, CMS gave rising juniors and seniors the option to stay at their current high school. Most did, resulting in a varsity football team led by freshmen and sophomores. The Wolves experienced crushing losses, only managing to put single-digit points on the board in a few games. But they kept on. Watch out for this team (and QB Ryder Polston) in the 2026-27 season, when they'll be equal in size but untouchable in preparation. *@brhswolves_football*

Place to Play Agricola with a Buzz:

Carolina Tabletop Games

When Rob Ross (not to be confused with Bob Ross) opened a board game store in 2016, he knew he wanted to attract adults, not the afterschool crowd. He realized it was easier to establish that culture than he imagined: He just had to get a state license to serve beer. Now customers can mix and match games like Blood on the Clocktower and Magic: The Gathering with pints from local brewers like Wooden Robot and Middle James. *315 Main St., Ste. 1, Pineville*

Disc Golf Course:

Kilborne Park

Tired of playing sports with high entry fees like golf and pickleball? Throw yourself into disc golf. The longstanding eastside park's course is a solid place to start. It's varied, easy to navigate, well maintained, and suits all skill levels. Frisbee on. *2600 Kilborne Drive*

Local Awards Show:

The Blumey Awards

Charlotte has produced a surprising amount of Broadway talent, and those journeys began in local classrooms. The Blumey Awards are like the Tony Awards for high school productions in and around Charlotte, and Blumenthal Arts makes each of their artisans feel like stars, from stage leads and ensembles to student costume and set designers. You'll be amazed at the teen talent packed inside Belk Theater for this year's event on May 18. *blumenthalarts.org*

Quaint Downtown Less Trafficked:

Old Town Rock Hill

Belmont—the Gaston County city, not the Charlotte neighborhood—has earned well-deserved recognition for its compact, charming downtown. But don't sleep on our neighbors south of the state line. Rock Hill and York County officials have developed an enviable historic district in a booming small city. It offers numerous local retailers; plenty of bars, restaurants, breweries, and cafes; and regular concerts and other events. It's like a mini-Charleston that's a 40-minute drive away.

RUSTY WILLIAMS

Place to Hit an Ollie:

APB Skatepark

Charleston-based apparel and sneaker brand APB opened a skatepark in Charlotte last summer. (The brand's first Charlotte store followed at the same location, The Collective on Tuckaseegee Road, in November.) It's free to use and hosts regular community events. *2705 Tuckaseegee Road*

Polyglot Pingpong:

Charlotte Table Tennis Club

Pingpong in the United States is a goofy rec room endeavor, often combined with red Solo cups filled with beer. In the rest of the world, table tennis is serious business, totally deserving of its spot in the Summer Olympics. So when competitive players from around the world end up in Charlotte, they gravitate to the Charlotte Table Tennis Club, which plays matches at First United Methodist Church: Membership includes former champions from Nicaragua, Barbados, and Trinidad and Tobago. *501 N. Tryon St.*

Visual Artist:

Elliana Esquivel

Illustrator Elliana Esquivel crafts surreal yet vivid worlds with sparse line work. She says her upbringing as a dual citizen of the U.S. and the Philippines forms that sensibility, with works that adorn covers of books published by HarperCollins and Little, Brown and Company. *elesqart.com*

Musician:

Austin McNeill

The Salisbury native discovered music as a 5-year-old singing in a Southern Baptist church. Today, he's a rising country star, with recent appearances at Nashville's Grand Ole Opry alongside Lainey Wilson, and, this month, a set at Lovin' Life Music Fest.

Expansion in the Face of Hollywood's Collapse:

The Independent Picture House

Yes, your couch is comfortable, but movies are still better with a crowd. Since 2022, the Independent Picture House has been Charlotte's best place to see Oscar nominees, arthouse experiments, and old movies that range from *Infernal Affairs* to *Desperately Seeking Susan*. Now it includes a fourth screen, in a theater that seats 145. The vibes are already good: When we caught *Nosferatu* in the new auditorium, the stranger sitting next to us offered to share his popcorn. *4237 Raleigh St.*

Free Electric-Powered Rideshare Service:

SouthPark Skipper

Just download the Freebee app, request a ride, select your destination, and confirm your pickup location. When the white car arrives, its gull-wing doors lift automatically to reveal a sleek, clean interior. It'll drop you anywhere within the SouthPark neighborhood between 8 a.m. and 9 p.m. *southparkclt.org*

RUSTY WILLIAMS; COURTESY, SOUTHPARK SKIPPER

LIVE

RUSTY WILLIAMS

Wallpaper Installer:

Elise Pentz at Paper & Paste

Here's the thing about wallpaper: You could waste a weekend trying to DIY it, or just call Elise to install it properly. She handles all the precise cutting and careful placement that you have no business doing yourself. Your walls—and your spouse—will thank you. *@eapentz*

Scalp Massage:

Passion Hair Co.

Fun fact: Each hair follicle on your head contains a sensory nerve. That's why a scalp massage feels so dreamy—it releases those feel-good hormones and gives you the green light to relax. At this University City head spa, owner Anna Pham uses techniques her mother and grandmother learned in Vietnam. Choose from a 60-, 70-, or 90-minute service and enjoy a hair wash; scalp, neck, and shoulder massage; and a foot rub. Add-ons include a lymphatic massage facial and a blowout. Have a few friends in need of some crown care? Anna and her team can accommodate groups of five Thursday through Saturday. *10230 Berkeley Place Drive, Ste. 250*

Hair Color Connoisseur:

Jessica Chatham

Most of her clients found her because they stopped strangers and asked, "Girrrrl. Who does your color?" Jessica can do highlights, lowlights, balayage, gray coverage, and root touch-ups—and wax your eyebrows or upper lip while your color processes. You can expect to be in her chair for a few hours because magic like this takes time. But an afternoon at the salon with a stack of crisp magazines never hurt anybody. *Salon Lofts SouthPark, 720 Governor Morrison St., Ste. 170*

Lip Blush Tattooing:

Genevieve & Co.

Once you choose your shade, your aesthetician numbs your lips and gets to work. It usually takes two passes to create that kissable tint, and you may experience a few days of light peeling, but after that, your color lasts up to three years. *1315 East Blvd., Ste. 150*

Self-Promotional Billboard Takeover:

Mark Spain

Like it or not, we're all familiar with his face and CASH OFFER—guaranteed. *Everywhere*

Etiquette Aficionada:

Elizabeth Anne Russell

This third-generation etiquette instructor doesn't just teach kids the difference between salad and dinner forks. Children ages 5 to 12 learn how to introduce themselves, send handwritten notes, and invite someone into a conversation circle—life skills that minimize the risk of jackassery, if you will. *@charlotteetiquette*

RUSTY WILLIAMS

Upholstery Refresher:

Modern Upkeep

Before you kick your couch to the curb, call Clint Green. Stains, spills, dingy fabric, pet hair, kid grime, even mildew on outdoor furniture—he can get them out and make your furniture and rugs like new again. He calls it a spa day for your house. It's as refreshing as it sounds. And if cleaning videos are your porn, his Instagram page is full of satisfying befores and afters. *@modern_upkeepllc*

Place to Freeze or Sweat Your Ass Off:

Sauna Culture

Finally, what we've all been waiting for: At Sauna Culture in Cotswold, you don't have to choose between freezing or sweating your ass off. The "sauna club," which opened last spring, offers four different temperature cold plunges and two saunas so you can scurry back and forth. *274 S. Sharon Amity Road, Ste. 1*

Portal to the *Real Housewives*:

Christian Gray Snow

He's what's known as a Bravo-influencer, posting hilarious *Real Housewives* and Bravoleb content. The Charlotte media personality has even managed to forge relationships with the women he turns into shareable memes. Last summer, he levitated in the Bravosphere and launched *My Friend, My Soulmate, My Podcast*, which he co-hosts with none other than the OG of the OC, Vicki Gunvalson. *@christiangraysnow*

Stand-Alone Spa:

Woodhouse Spa

It has the feel of a resort spa—robes, fluffy chaise lounges, infrared sauna, salt room, mineral baths—but stands alone in the Piedmont Town Center. Enjoy facials, massages, and a variety of body treatments. You could spend the whole day there. But you'll have to leave when you're done. *4625 Piedmont Row Drive, Ste. 125*

Helium and Happiness:

Confetti Castle

When you hire Tiffany Donovan and her party people for your event, you don't need to know the lingo or even what's possible with balloon arches. Just tell them your colors and vibe, and they'll create epic garlands, backdrops, and light-up marquee letters that signal to your guests, "The fun starts here." *theconfetticastle.com*

SCRAP DADDY COMPOSTING
SCRAP DADDY

Scrap Daddy:

Scrap Daddy Composting

We love a Daddy who collects our chicken bones and carrot tops each week—and returns finished compost twice a year—so that we don't have to get our hands dirty. *scrapdaddycomposting.com*

Place to Rock:

The 11-Chair Array on Concourse A

Charlotte Douglas International Airport is justifiably proud of its more than 100 rocking chairs, the first of which were installed in 1997; aside from construction that will not end, they're CLT's signature feature. The airport recommends a group of 11 chairs about 100 yards beyond the entrance of 32-gate Concourse A, on the left, just past the first people mover. The chairs face tall windows, and fliers kick back with their phones, books, coffees, and snacks. It's as calm a spot as you're likely to find in an airport: Watch planes taxi and baggage carts scurry, not you. *5501 Josh Birmingham Parkway*

RUSTY WILLIAMS

Window and Upholstery Glam Up:

Posh Diggs

A new window treatment or reupholstered furniture can do for a room what a set of lashes and a spray tan can do for your face. Posh Diggs is like your room esthetician, offering custom drapes, pillows, duvets, and furniture upholstery. *8155 Ardrey Kell Road, Ste. 101*

Way to Make Your Party Pop:

Mama K's Kettle Corn

Want to draw attention to your event or storefront and form a mob of drooling passersby? Book Mama K's trailer and fill the air with the irresistible scent of sweet, buttery popcorn. For gifts or your own personal stash, they sell this addictive treat by the bag, too. *@mkkettlecorn*

Ingrown Eliminator:

Amber Holland Skin

If you suffer from ingrown hairs, razor burn, or are just over the tedium of shaving, go see Amber. She uses one of the most advanced medical laser hair removal machines, at very reasonable prices. *709 International Drive, Ste. B*

COURTESY, JAPAN FEST / URBAN DISTRICT MARKET

BOBLIGHT:

FOOD FESTIVALS

If you want some top-notch gourmet grazing, check out the **MIDNIGHT ALLEY ASIAN STREET FOOD FESTIVAL** or the **HOLA FESTIVAL** (celebrating Latin American culture). You'll have to wait until fall for those festivals, but the second annual **JAPAN FEST** is happening May 17 and 18 at Urban District Market. There's more to Charlotte's food festivals than corn dogs and funnel cakes. *2315 N. Davidson St.*

HONEY TOAST

Japan Fest is happening in May at Urban District Market.

SHOP

thriftpony
thrift pony
BOUTIQUE
SHOP
#shopthepinkbus
@thriftponyclt

Place to Play Dress-Up:

Thrift Pony

This resale shop is bright pink and glittery, a walk-in treasure chest of vintage dresses, low-rise cargos, and fuzzy jackets of all sizes. Dressing rooms are wallpapered in vintage magazines, and the mirror has a squiggly pink frame. *1824 Statesville Ave., Ste. 103*

RUSTY WILLIAMS

RUSTY WILLIAMS

IKKA SOUDEN
PRIME FISH
IMPERIA
Muskmelon

Sake and Provisions Shop:

Prime Fish Cellar

When you want an encore of anything you tasted at Omakase Experience, head a few doors down to this gourmet market and bottle shop in Providence Plaza. It's stocked with rare wines, premium sakes, fresh wasabi root from Japan, and hard-to-find ingredients to make your own sushi. It's also the only Charlotte retailer to carry the Yubari King muskmelon, one of the world's most expensive fruits. If you're in a rush, grab a fresh sashimi box or some A5 wagyu meatballs from the freezer. If you have some time, stay to sample caviar and wine flights. *2921 Providence Road*

Place to Get Tins of Fish:

The Culture Shop

If celebrities had to stock their pantries in Charlotte, this is where they'd go. Shelves are lined with provisions like really good cheese, natural wines, and, of course, the modern-day cool-cat snack: tinned fish. The Culture Shop carries everything under the sea—smoked caviar, Fishwife anchovies, octopus paté. Get a sleeve of fancy crackers and a tin of fish, and settle into that omega 3-rich, salty high that only fish packaged in metal can provide. *1425 Kennon St.*

Place to Cast a Spell:

Sanctuary Imports

Sometimes, we all need a jar of dried herbs to throw in a pot and cast a little spell. Sanctuary Imports in Plaza Midwood is a metaphysical playground that hosts new moon circles, tea gatherings, Reiki, sound baths, and Tarot readings. If you've ever wanted your aura photo taken, they can do that, too. *822 Lamar Ave.*

Meat to Support Western North Carolina:

The Chop Shop Butchery

One of the easiest ways to support Hurricane Helene recovery efforts is to shop Western North Carolina businesses. Asheville-based whole-animal butcher Chop Shop Butchery has a location in Myers Park. When you buy its (gorgeous) short ribs or pork chops, you support not only the shop but also the Western North Carolina farmers who supply it. *2820 Selwyn Ave., Ste. 160*

Paint Store to Get DIY-Inspired:

CLT Paint Cures

This south Charlotte retailer is the only woman-owned, independent paint store in the state. Find top brands like Benjamin Moore, Romabio, and Golden Paintworks, plus luxury brands like Little Greene. Owner and color expert Kristine Compton, who worked at the store for almost 20 years before taking it over, is always there with a smile and helpful guidance. *8706 Pineville-Matthews Road, Ste. 120*

Old School Golf Club Whisperer:

John Gamble, Carolina Golf Manufacturing

When something's a bit off-kilter with your club—and you're certain it's not the person swinging it—Johnny's your guy. You'll find golfers of all levels lined up inside his Plaza Midwood shop waiting for him to tinker with their drivers. *2917 Central Ave., Ste. B*

Cocktail Mixers:

Spirits of Alchemy

Most cocktail mixers taste overly sweet and artificial. But each bottle from Charlotte-based Spirits of Alchemy feels dialed and packaged. One of its Old Fashioned mixers blends cinnamon and smoked cayenne pepper, while its Cast Away product, fusing mango and pineapple, conjures Caribbean vibes. All varieties can be found on the company's website or at local shops, including Sip City, Moxie Mercantile, Tip Top Daily Market, and Paper Skyscraper locations. *drinkspiritsofalchemy.com*

BOBLIGHT:
OVERSTOCK RESELLERS

Our readers love to shop, and we all go nuts for a deal. When we reported the opening of **RECLECTIC**, the overstock discount store for Urban Outfitters, Anthropologie, and Free People, half a million people interacted with the post. So brace yourself—Charlotte's got more. **THERE'S WHERE YA BIN**, an Amazon overstock and returns store in Matthews (1834 Matthews Township Parkway, Ste. 100) and Concord (30 Branchview Drive NE); **FAST DESIGN** (4746 Sweden Road), a Target home liquidation warehouse; and the **FRONTGATE** outlet (9571A South Blvd.), which sells discounted returns, overstock items, and minorly damaged goods from the pricey home furnishing retailer.

RUSTY WILLIAMS

REPLAY
SPORTS CARDS

RUSTY WILLIAMS

Sports Card Selection:

Replay Sports Cards

This South End shop has sealed boxes, rare cards, and an adorkable staff that's schooled in specific eras and players. Check their schedule for monthly Rip Nights where you can buy, sell, and trade with fellow collectors and enjoy free giveaways. *115 E. Park Ave., Ste. C*

Noelle Muñoz models her Soñadora necklace, 6-Stone ring, Bones bracelet, and Solara earrings.

Jewelry featured on the cover includes the Gypsy Queen set with Tate necklaces, Gypsy hoops, My Pet cuff, 6-Stone ring, and Bones bracelet.

Boho Modern Jewelry:

Noelle Muñoz

It's hard to watch Noelle Muñoz at her workbench and call her a jewelry designer. When she's bouncing between the torch, soldering tools, clamps, metal files, and polishing machine, it feels disrespectful to call her anything other than an artisan. Her jewelry blends architectural shapes and Mexican iconography, resulting in striking silver and gold statement pieces that whisper rather than yell. On her website, you'll find a range of earrings, necklaces, and rings under $200 as well as bold signature pieces like her Bones bracelet ($825) and the Soñadora necklace ($835). *noellemunozjewelry.com*

Place to Get Your Giddy Up:

El Potrero Western Wear

This ain't Texas, but you can pass for a Lone Star native after a trip to this east Charlotte store. Find a vast selection of western hats, boots, leather belts, and apparel for men, women, and kids from brands like Ariat, Stetson, and Cuadra. If the vibe is cowboy-chic, this is the place to shop. *3036 Eastway Drive*

Community in Motion:

VisArt Video

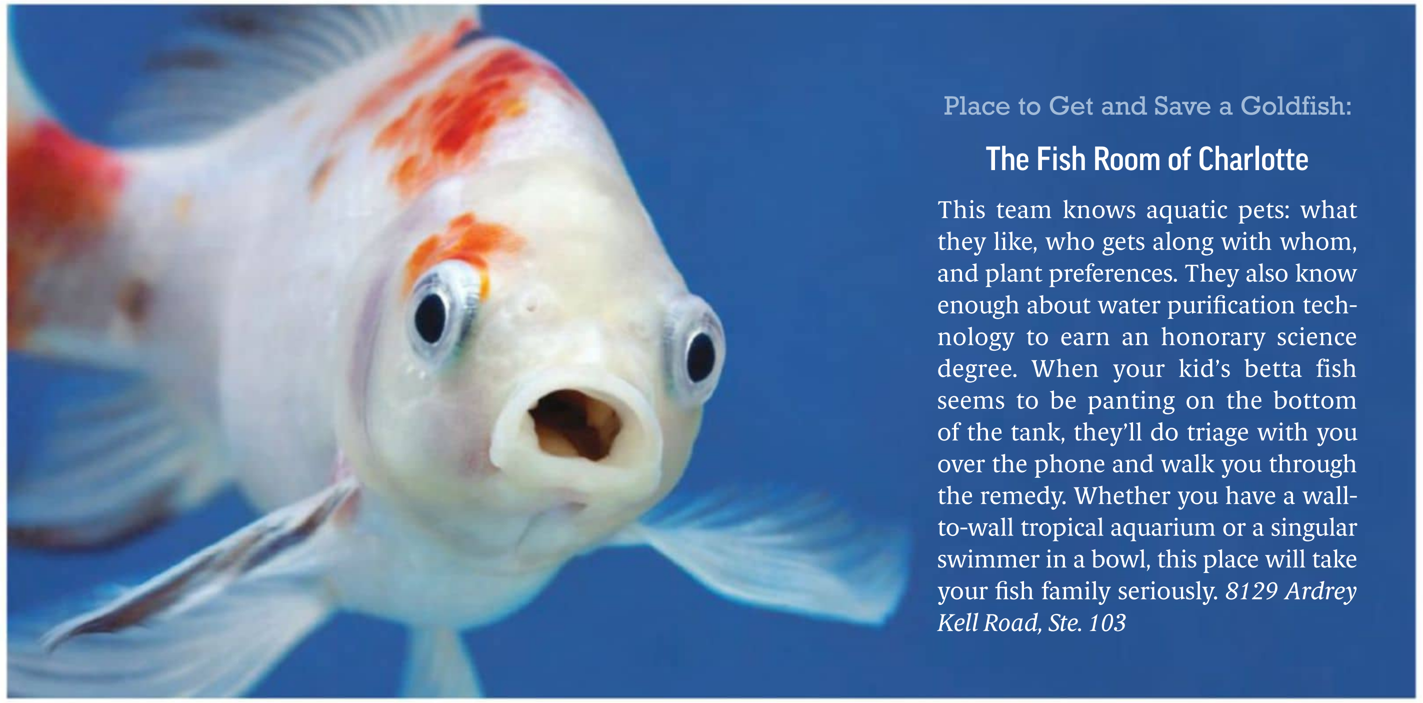
Charlotte's last video rental store officially became a nonprofit in 2021. With a rarity-filled trove of 50,000-plus titles, the store boasts "the largest collection of film and video on the East Coast." Beyond access to that treasure, visitors to this east Charlotte spot can take advantage of VisArt's educational programming, special screenings, coffee shop, and community events. *3104 Eastway Drive*

PC Paradise:

Micro Center

Think of it as a Home Depot for home office tech. Micro Center carries row upon row of computing products, 3D printers, robotics kits, graphics cards, gaming-specific upgrades, and much more. One major attraction for 3D printer enthusiasts: a filament-dispensing robot that produces your selection in seconds. *4744 South Blvd.*

RUSTY WILLIAMS



Place to Get and Save a Goldfish:

The Fish Room of Charlotte

This team knows aquatic pets: what they like, who gets along with whom, and plant preferences. They also know enough about water purification technology to earn an honorary science degree. When your kid's betta fish seems to be panting on the bottom of the tank, they'll do triage with you over the phone and walk you through the remedy. Whether you have a wall-to-wall tropical aquarium or a singular swimmer in a bowl, this place will take your fish family seriously. *8129 Ardrey Kell Road, Ste. 103*

Paper Goods:

Good Postage

Many folks still love a nice handwritten note. Good Postage has the materials for that and much more at its Camp North End store—with paper that's recycled and printed locally. Beyond its notecards, notebooks, and writing tools, you'll also find original art, art supplies, pouches, totes, and more. *1824 Statesville Ave., Ste. 106A*

Christmas Superstore:

Holiday House & Co. Pop-Up

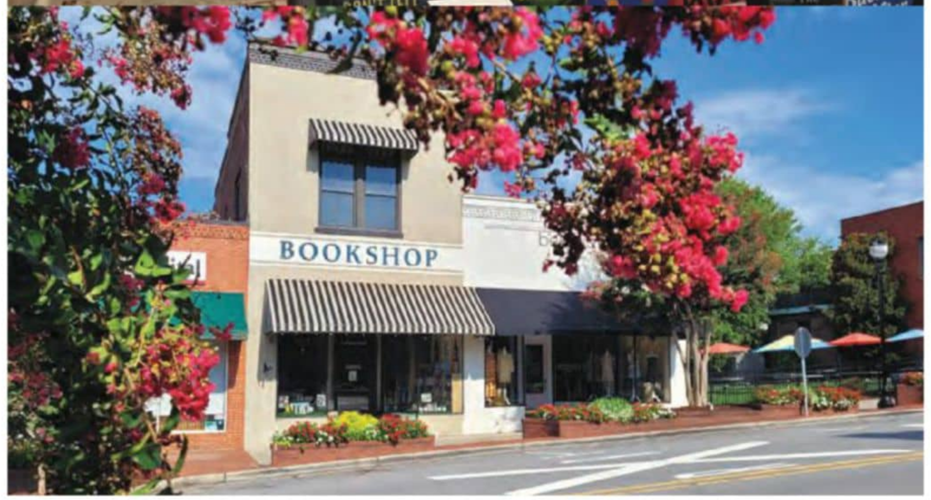
This isn't the place to go for a new ornament or strand of lights. This is the spot for those who want to make Santa gasp when he sees your tree. We're told they'll be back this year in a new location. *@holidayhouseandco*

Bookshelf Wealth:

Belmont Bookshop

Browse books and vinyl records, play board games, have a drink with friends, and let the kids explore the indoor treehouse. The big green chalkboard in the back always has a schedule of events, like book release parties, kids story times, and blind date book clubs (if you know, you know). *7 N. Main St., Belmont*

LORNE
DREAM STATE
ERIC
GRADY HENDRIX
SWORDHEART
SHOW
EMILY HENRY



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2025 BEST OF THE BEST

VOTERS' CHOICE AWARDS

Results from
January-February 2025
online polls

HERMAN NICHOLSON

VOTERS' CHOICE

Results from online polls: **Food + Drink** (Jan. 6-19, 2025)

FOOD + DRINK

BEST BAGEL
★ Poppy's Bagels
Runner-Up
The Accidental Baker

BEST BBQ
★ Midwood Smokehouse
Runner-Up
Noble Smoke

BEST BRUNCH
★ The Artisan's Palate
Runner-Up
Snooze A.M. Eatery

BEST BURGERS
★ Ace No. 3
Runner-Up
Harriet's Hamburgers

BEST CHEF
★ Sam Diminich
Runner-Up
Christa Csoka

BEST CHINESE FOOD
★ Baoding
Runner-Up
Lam's Kitchen

BEST DELI/MARKET
★ Rhino Market & Deli
Runner-Up
Common Market

BEST FAMILY-FRIENDLY RESTAURANT
★ Phat Burrito
Runner-Up
Mama Ricotta's

BEST FOOD TRUCK
★ El Veneno
Runner-Up
Nacho Average Truck

BEST FRENCH FOOD
★ Café Monte
Runner-Up
Coquette

BEST FRIED CHICKEN
★ Haberdish
Runner-Up
Bossy Beulah's

BEST GIRLS NIGHT OUT
★ Merchant and Trade
Runner-Up
The Artisan's Palate

BEST GREEK FOOD
★ Greco Fresh Grille
Runner-Up
Yafo Kitchen

BEST INDIAN FOOD
★ Copper
Runner-Up
Curry Gate

BEST ITALIAN FOOD
★ Mama Ricotta's
Runner-Up
Little Mama's

BEST JAPANESE FOOD
★ O-Ku
Runner-Up
Yakiko Hibachi Grill

BEST LATIN FOOD
★ Calle Sol
Runner-Up
Sabor Latin Street Grill

BEST MEXICAN FOOD
★ Three Amigos
Runner-Up
La Victoria Mexican Restaurant

Rhino Market & Deli was voted Best Deli/Market for 2025's Voters' Choice awards.

HERMAN NICHOLSON

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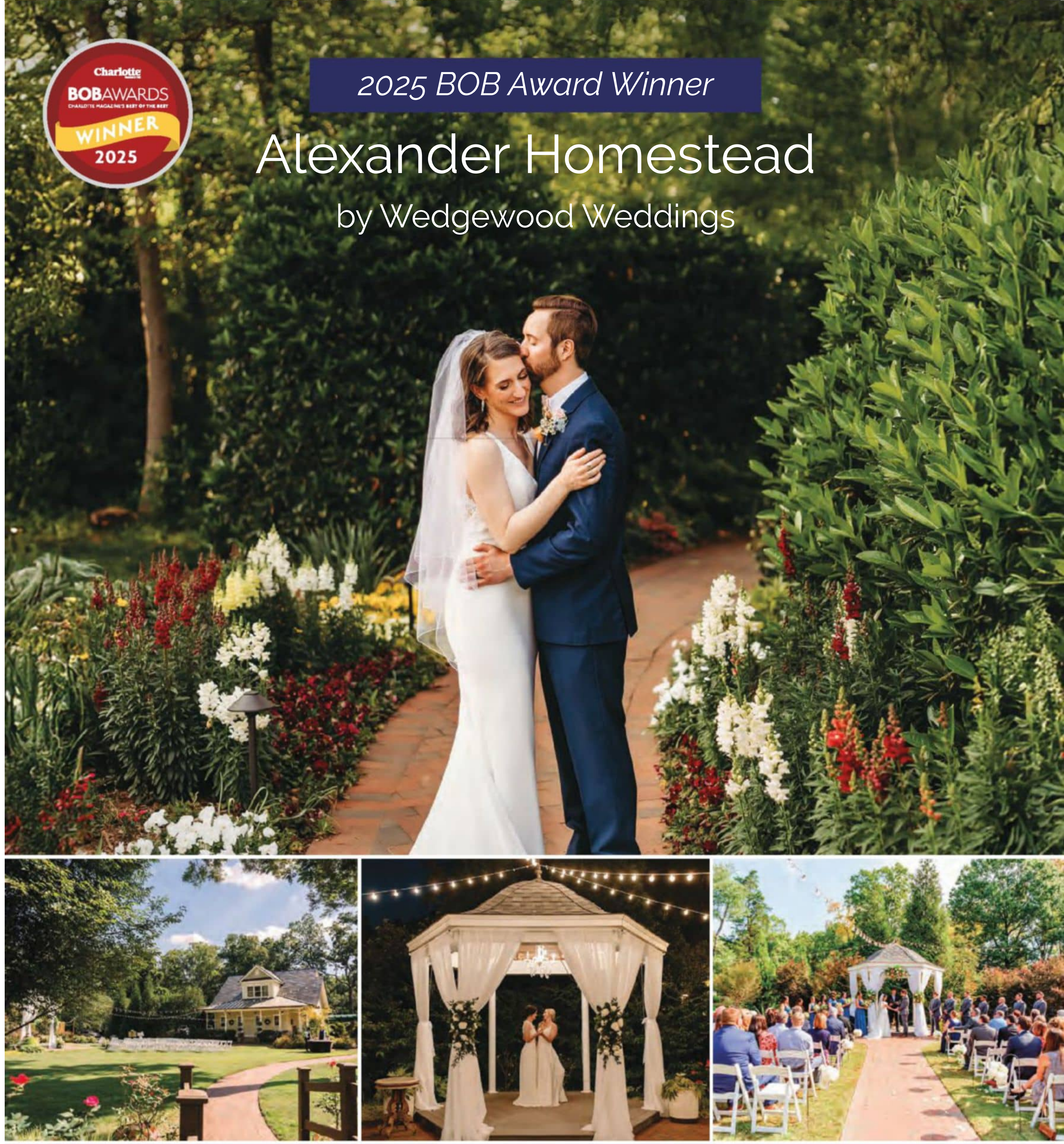

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VOTERS' CHOICE

Results from online polls: **Food + Drink** (Jan. 6-19, 2025)

BEST MIDDLE EASTERN FOOD
★ Yafo Kitchen
Runner-Up
Jasmine Grill

BEST NEW RESTAURANT
★ Albertine
Runner-Up
DŌZO Japanese American Kitchen

BEST PIZZA
★ Bird Pizzeria
Runner-Up
Inizio Pizza

BEST PLACE FOR A DATE NIGHT
★ The Artisan's Palate
Runner-Up
Merchant and Trade

BEST SOUTHERN FOOD
★ Haberdish
Runner-Up
Mert's Heart & Soul

BEST SMOOTHIE/JUICE BAR
★ Green Brothers Juice
Runner-Up
Clean Juice

BEST SEAFOOD
★ Fin & Fino
Runner-Up
Sea Level

BEST SPANISH FOOD
★ Barcelona Wine Bar
Runner-Up
Miro Spanish Grille

BEST STEAKHOUSE
★ Steak 48
Runner-Up
Beef 'N Bottle

BEST SUSHI
★ YUME Ramen Sushi & Bar
Runner-Up
O-Ku

BEST THAI FOOD
★ Thai Taste
Runner-Up
Deejai Thai

BEST VEGETARIAN/ VEGAN FOOD
★ Oh My Soul
Runner-Up
Sanctuary Bistro

Not Just Coffee, winner for Best Coffee Shop.

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BEST LATIN - CALLE SOL LATIN CAFÉ
BEST MIDDLE EASTERN - YAFO KITCHEN
BEST ITALIAN - MAMA RICOTTA'S
RUNNER UP BEST ITALIAN - LITTLE MAMA'S ITALIAN
RUNNER UP BEST GREEK - YAFO KITCHEN
RUNNER UP BEST FAMILY RESTAURANT - MAMA RICOTTA'S

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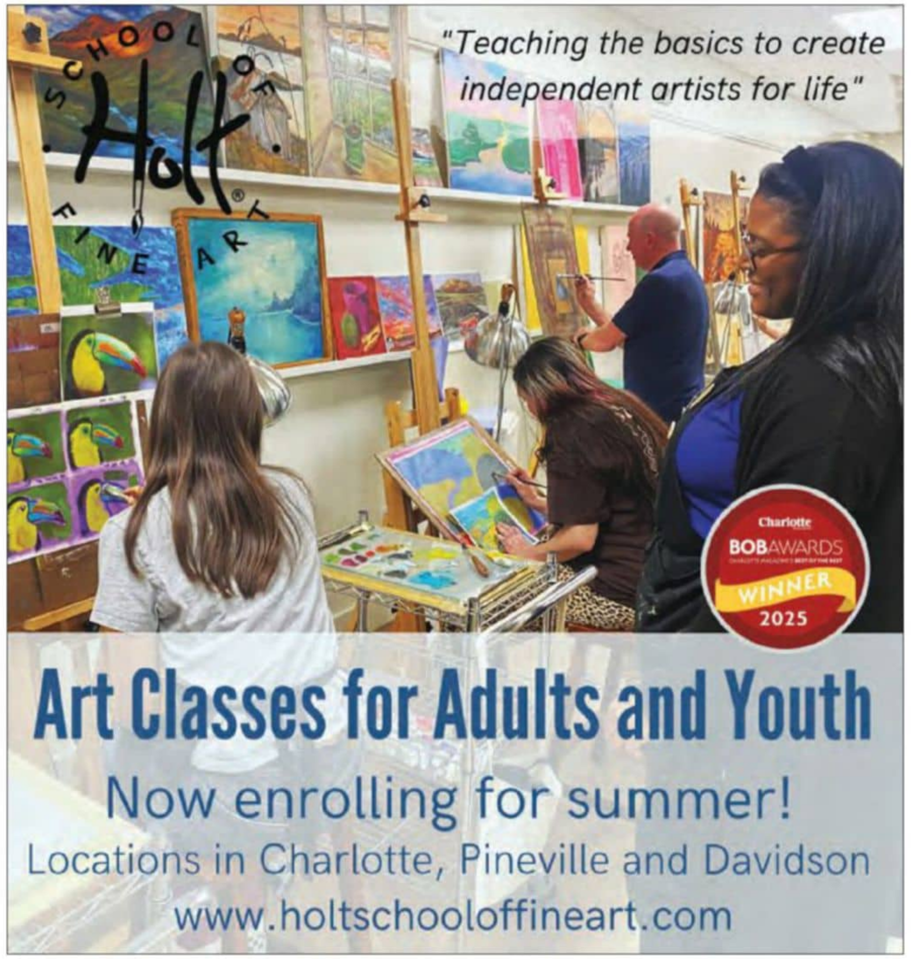
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VOTERS' CHOICE

Results from online polls: **Food + Drink** (Jan. 6-19, 2025)

Foxcroft Wine Co. won a Voters' Choice award for Best Wine List.

BEST VIETNAMESE FOOD
★ Lang Van
Runner-Up
Pho Hua

BEST BARTENDER
★ Cecelia Crook
Runner-Up
Alejandro Ibanez

BEST COFFEE SHOP
★ Not Just Coffee
Runner-Up
Enderly Coffee

BEST CRAFT COCKTAILS
★ Idlewild
Runner-Up
Humbug

BEST HAPPY HOUR
★ Caroline's Oyster Bar
Runner-Up
Merchant and Trade

BEST IRISH PUB
★ The Workman's Friend
Runner-Up
Ri Rá Irish Pub

BEST LOCAL BREWERY
★ Resident Culture Brewing
Runner-Up
Vaulted Oak Brewing

BEST LOCAL DISTILLERY
★ Great Wagon Road Distilling
Runner-Up
Muddy River Distillery

BEST NIGHTCLUB
★ Trio
Runner-Up
Coyote Joe's

BEST ROOFTOP BAR
★ Aura Rooftop
Runner-Up
Merchant and Trade

BEST SMALL PLATES
★ Barcelona Wine Bar
Runner-Up
Chapter 6

BEST SPORTS BAR
★ Duckworth's
Runner-Up
Ed's Tavern

BEST WINE LIST
★ Foxcroft Wine Co.
Runner-Up
Steak 48

BEST WINERY WITHIN AN HOUR'S DRIVE
★ Veronét Vineyards & Winery
Runner-Up
Raffaldini Vineyards

BEST BAKERY
★ The Batchmaker
Runner-Up
Villani's Bakery

BEST CHOCOLATE SHOP
★ JF Chocolat
Runner-Up
The Secret Chocolatier

PETER TAYLOR

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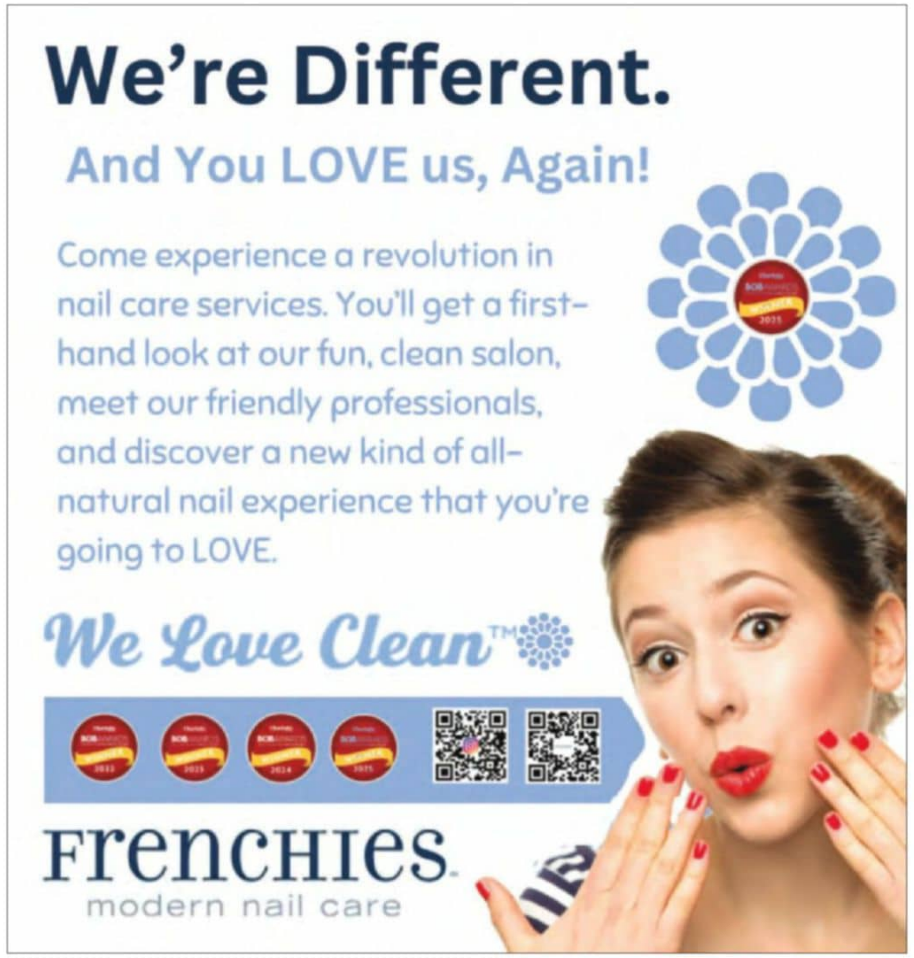

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VOTERS' CHOICE

Results from online polls: **Food + Drink** (Jan. 6-19, 2025); **Shopping + Services + Wellness** (Jan. 20-Feb. 2, 2025)

BEST COOKIES
★ The Batchmaker
Runner-Up
The Honeybear Bake Shop

BEST CUPCAKES
★ Suárez Bakery
Runner-Up
The Batchmaker

BEST CUSTOM CAKES
★ Suárez Bakery
Runner-Up
The Accidental Baker

BEST DESSERT MENU
★ Supperland
Runner-Up
Restaurant Constance

BEST FROZEN YOGURT
★ TCBY
Runner-Up
Two Scoops

BEST DOUGHNUT
★ B.A. Donuts
Runner-Up
Reigning Doughnuts

BEST ICE CREAM
★ Two Scoops
Runner-Up
Seemingly Overzealous

SHOPPING + SERVICES + WELLNESS

BEST WOMEN'S BOUTIQUE
★ Vestique
Runner-Up
Boem

BEST MEN'S CLOTHING STORE
★ OMJ Clothing
Runner-Up
Tabor

BEST PLACE TO BUY CUSTOM SUITS
★ OMJ Clothing
Runner-Up
Taylor Richards & Conger

BEST STORE FOR CHARLOTTE APPAREL
★ Glory Days Apparel
Runner-Up
704 Shop

BEST BRIDAL BOUTIQUE
★ Magnolia Laine Bridal
Runner-Up
Anjolique

BEST FINE JEWELRY STORE
★ Windsor Jewelers
Runner-Up
Perry's Diamonds & Estate Jewelry

BEST LOCAL JEWELRY DESIGNER
★ Perry's Diamonds & Estate Jewelry
Runner-Up
Sarah Poursh Designs

BEST HOME FURNISHINGS + DECOR STORE
★ Chinoiserie Squirrel
Runner-Up
Slate Interiors

BEST HOME APPLIANCE STORE
★ Queen City Homestore
Runner-Up
Plaza Appliance Mart

BEST PLACE TO BUY CHARLOTTE-MADE PRODUCTS
★ CLT Find
Runner-Up
Paper Skyscraper

BEST LOCAL GIFT SHOP
★ Paper Skyscraper
Runner-Up
CLT Find

BEST CHARLOTTE SHOPPING DESTINATION/ AREA
★ SouthPark Mall
Runner-Up
Atherton Mill

BEST CRAFT BEER BOTTLE SHOP
★ Salud Beer Shop
Runner-Up
Brawley's Beverage

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VOTERS' CHOICE

Results from online polls: **Shopping + Services + Wellness** (Jan. 20-Feb. 2, 2025)

BEST WINE STORE
★ Winestore
Runner-Up
Foxcroft Wine Co.

BEST PET SUPPLIES STORE
★ Pet Wants
Runner-Up
Pet Supplies Plus

BEST AUTO DEALER
★ Audi Charlotte
Runner-Up
Hendrick Lexus Charlotte

BEST INDEPENDENT BOOKSTORE
★ Park Road Books
Runner-Up
Trope Bookshop

BEST PLACE TO BUY CBD PRODUCTS
★ Get Me Some Green Apotecary
Runner-Up
Greenlife Remedies

BEST LOCAL PLANT NURSERY
★ The Cactus Club
Runner-Up
Pike Nurseries

BEST RESIDENTIAL REMODELING COMPANY
★ GC Design Build
Runner-Up
T.G.A. Renovated

BEST HOME BUILDER
★ Classica Homes
Runner-Up
Copper Builders

BEST HOME IMPROVEMENT COMPANY
★ Moisture Loc
Runner-Up
T.G.A. Renovated

BEST INTERIOR DESIGN COMPANY
★ Stephanie Calderon Interiors
Runner-Up
Indigo Pruitt Design

BEST HOME ORGANIZATION COMPANY
★ Simplicity Organizers
Runner-Up
Prim Space

BEST LANDSCAPING COMPANY
★ MetroGreenscape
Runner-Up
G&G Landscape Solutions

BEST KITCHEN AND BATHROOM RESOURCES
★ T.G.A. Renovated
Runner-Up
Carolina Renovation Warehouse

BEST REAL ESTATE FIRM
★ Northstar Real Estate
Runner-Up
EXP Realty

BEST REALTOR
★ Misty Hurd
Runner-Up
Sam Grogan

BEST PLUMBING SERVICE
★ Carter Quality Plumbing
Runner-Up
WyattWorks Plumbing Charlotte

BEST WINDOW RESOURCES
★ Sunburst Shutters
Runner-Up
Zen Windows

BEST HEATING AND COOLING SERVICES
★ Morris-Jenkins
Runner-Up
Travis Crawford Heating Cooling & Plumbing

BEST HOUSEKEEPING/CLEANING SERVICE
★ Maid Brigade
Runner-Up
Dust and Mop House Cleaning

BEST HOUSE PAINTER
★ F2 Construction
Runner-Up
Valentine Painting

BEST STAYCATION HOTEL
★ JW Marriott Charlotte
Runner-Up
The Ballantyne

BEST MOVING SERVICE
★ Make a Move
Runner-Up
Hilldrup

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VOTERS' CHOICE

Results from online polls: **Shopping** + **Services** + **Wellness** (Jan. 20-Feb. 2, 2025)

BEST ASSISTED LIVING/ RETIREMENT COMMUNITY
★ Southminster
Runner-Up
Windsor Run

BEST FINANCIAL ADVISOR/ WEALTH MANAGEMENT SERVICES
★ Indira Tinsley (Morgan Stanley)
Runner-Up
Tillman Insurance Advisors

BEST LAW FIRM
★ Stewart Law Offices
Runner-Up
Price Petho & Associates

BEST PLACE FOR TAX PREPARATION
★ Fisher, P.A.
Runner-Up
Atypical Advisors

BEST TATTOO PARLOR
★ The Grey Ash
Runner-Up
Made To Last

BEST AUTO REPAIR
★ Al's Auto Repair
Runner-Up
Shamrock Auto Care

BEST GRAPHIC/WEB DESIGN FIRM
★ Yellow Duck Marketing
Runner-Up
NiceDay

BEST PR FIRM
★ Yellow Duck Marketing
Runner-Up
Anna Stallmann Communications

BEST AD AGENCY
★ Crimson Park Digital
Runner-Up
NiceDay

BEST DJ
★ Carolina DJ Professionals
Runner-Up
Split Second Sound

BEST CATERER
★ Best Impressions
Runner-Up
Porcupine Provisions

BEST PHOTOGRAPHER
★ Mike Anthony
Runner-Up
Poprock Photography

BEST EVENT RENTALS
★ Party Reflections
Runner-Up
Curated Events

BEST PARTY/EVENT PLANNER
★ J. Leigh Events
Runner-Up
Third Rock Events

BEST VIDEOGRAPHER
★ The 5 and 2 Project
Runner-Up
Nowsay Media

BEST WEDDING/SPECIAL EVENT VENUE
★ Alexander Homestead
Runner-Up
Sweet Magnolia Estate

BEST FLORIST
★ Jade Floral Co.
Runner-Up
Proper Flower

BEST DRY CLEANERS
★ Springfresh Cleaners
Runner-Up
Q Dry Cleaners

BEST TAILOR/ALTERATIONS
★ Anna's Alterations
Runner-Up
Myers Park Tailors

BEST TRAVEL AGENCY
★ Corporate Travel Management / CTM Vacations
Runner-Up
Jen Cron Dream Vacations

BEST PUBLIC/CHARTER SCHOOL
★ Providence High School
Runner-Up
Shamrock Gardens Elementary

BEST PRIVATE SCHOOL
★ Providence Day School
Runner-Up
Charlotte Latin

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VOTERS' CHOICE

Results from online polls: **Shopping + Services + Wellness** (Jan. 20-Feb. 2, 2025)

BEST SUMMER CAMP
★ Engineering Camp Charlotte
Runner-Up
Connick School of Irish Dance

BEST AFTER-SCHOOL CARE/PROGRAM
★ JTEAM Afterschool Program
Runner-Up
Eastway Regional Recreation Center

BEST TUTOR SERVICE
★ Ballantyne Reading Academy
Runner-Up
Dynamic Learning Connection

BEST COLLEGE PLANNING SERVICE
★ EWC College Consulting
Runner-Up
International College Counselors

BEST PET BOARDING/DAY CARE
★ Bed and Bark
Runner-Up
The Dog Wizard

BEST VETERINARIAN
★ Rea Road Animal Hospital
Runner-Up
Carolina Pets Animal Hospital

BEST DOG TRAINER
★ Obedient K9 Academy
Runner-Up
The Dog Wizard

BEST PHYSICAL THERAPIST
★ Origin Rehabilitation
Runner-Up
The Charlotte Athlete

BEST YOGA STUDIO
★ Y2 Yoga
Runner-Up
The Coterie

BEST PILATES/BARRE STUDIO
★ The Bar Method
Runner-Up
Hilliard Studio Method

BEST CARDIO WORKOUT CLASS
★ West Kept Secret
Runner-Up
MADabolic

BEST BOUTIQUE GYM
★ West Kept Secret
Runner-Up
Lemonade Fit

BEST BARBERSHOP
★ Scissors & Scotch
Runner-Up
Caliber Men's Grooming

BEST WOMEN'S HAIR SALON
★ JMY The Salon
Runner-Up
Moss & Black Salon

BEST WOMEN'S HAIR COLORING
★ Denise Antonacci Salon
Runner-Up
JMY The Salon

BEST MANICURE/PEDICURE
★ Frenchies Modern Nail Care
Runner-Up
Aloha Nails Blakeney

BEST LASHES & BROWS
★ Le Petit Spa
Runner-Up
Contour Institute

BEST BLOWOUT
★ Moss & Black Salon
Runner-Up
JMY The Salon

BEST HAIR REMOVAL
★ Providence Plastic Surgery
Runner-Up
Le Petit Spa

BEST PLACE TO GET YOUR MAKEUP DONE
★ Moss & Black Salon
Runner-Up
LookLove

BEST MED SPA
★ Carolina Facial Plastics
Runner-Up
The Skin Center by CPS

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- Jonathan Kulbersh, MD

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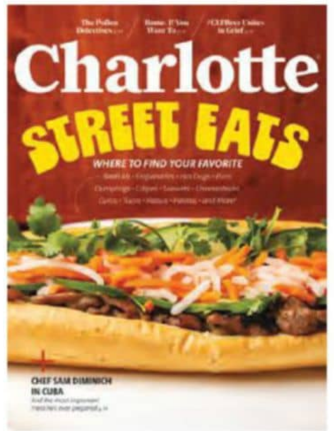
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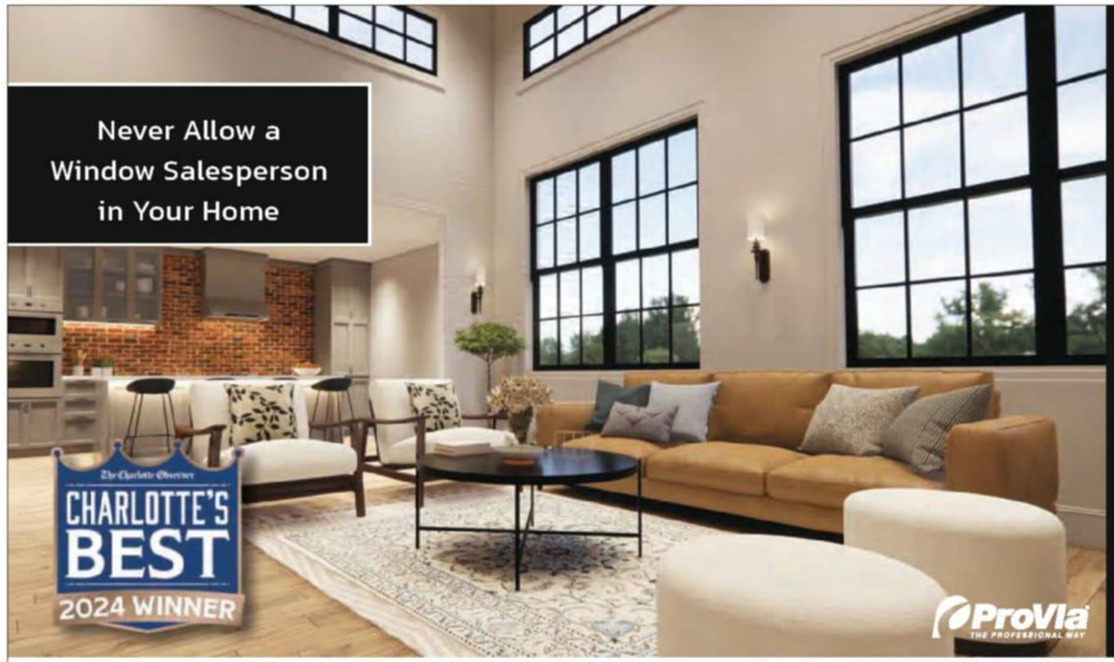
Never Allow a Window Salesperson in Your Home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VOTERS' CHOICE

Results from online polls: **Shopping + Services + Wellness** (Jan. 20-Feb. 2, 2025); **Media + Culture + Entertainment** (Feb. 3-16, 2025)

BEST DAY SPA
★ Le Petit Spa
Runner-Up
Spa by JW

BEST PLASTIC SURGERY PRACTICE
★ Charlotte Plastic Surgery
Runner-Up
Providence Plastic Surgery

BEST FACIAL PLASTIC SURGEON
★ Dr. Kulbersh (Carolina Facial Plastics)
Runner-Up
Dr. Jack Scheuer (Charlotte Plastic Surgery)

BEST ACUPUNCTURIST
★ Carolina Sports Clinic
Runner-Up
Wendy Swanson

BEST TANNING SALON
★ Organic Bronze Bar
Runner-Up
Bronzed & Boujee

BEST CHIROPRACTOR
★ Carolina Sports Clinic
Runner-Up
Integrative Chiropractic Matthews

BEST MENTAL HEALTH THERAPIST/COUNSELING
★ ModernMind Counseling & Wellness
Runner-Up
Bright View Counseling

BEST HEARING SERVICES
★ Levine Hearing
Runner-Up
Premier Audiology & Hearing Aid Center

BEST FERTILITY SERVICES
★ Reach Fertility Center
Runner-Up
Carolinas Fertility Institute

BEST DERMATOLOGIST
★ Paviol Dermatology
Runner-Up
Charlotte Skin & Laser

MEDIA + CULTURE + ENTERTAINMENT

BEST AUTHOR
★ Jamie Weatherly
Runner-Up
Tina Martin

BEST CHARLOTTE INFLUENCER
★ Miranda in Charlotte (@mirandainclt)
Runner-Up
Dana Brooke (@danabrookexo)

BEST CHARLOTTE INSTAGRAM ACCOUNT
★ @danabrookexo
Runner-Up
@dailydreclt

BEST CHARLOTTE X ACCOUNT
★ @axioscharlotte
Runner-Up
@queen_city_news

BEST CHARLOTTE TIKTOK ACCOUNT
★ @merenator
Runner-Up
@queencitytrends

BEST COMPANY TO WORK FOR
★ Choate Construction
Runner-Up
Autism Strong Foundation

BEST DIY STUDIO/CLASS/WORKSHOP
★ Holt School of Fine Art
Runner-Up
Splatter Charlotte

BEST FAMILY ATTRACTION
★ Carowinds
Runner-Up
U.S. National Whitewater Center

VOTERS' CHOICE

Results from online polls: **Media + Culture + Entertainment** (Feb. 3-16, 2025)

BEST GOLF COURSE
★ Cedarwood Country Club
Runner-Up
Quail Hollow Country Club

BEST CHARITY EVENT/FUNDRAISER
★ Safe House Project's Annual Hope Gala
Runner-Up
Unlocked Handbag Bingo

BEST FESTIVAL
★ BuildStrong Festival for Autism
Runner-Up
BOOM Charlotte

BEST HOLIDAY EVENT
★ Southern Christmas Show
Runner-Up
Jingle Bowl

BEST POP-UP EVENT
★ Hunnid Dollar Art Fair
Runner-Up
Girl Tribe Pop Up

BEST KARAOKE SPOT
★ Jeff's Bucket Shop
Runner-Up
Seoul Food

BEST LIVE PERFORMANCE VENUE
★ The Amp Ballantyne
Runner-Up
Middle C Jazz

BEST LOCAL BAND/MUSICIAN
★ David Taylor & The Tallboys
Runner-Up
Val Merza

BEST LIVE ENTERTAINER
★ Harvey Cummings
Runner-Up
Lynsea

BEST PERFORMING THEATRE GROUP
★ Moving Poets
Runner-Up
Three Bone Theatre

BEST VISUAL ARTIST
★ Dammit Wesley
Runner-Up
Amy Moffatt

BEST ART GALLERY
★ SE CLT Gallery
Runner-Up
Shain Gallery

BEST MUSEUM
★ The Mint Museum
Runner-Up
Charlotte Museum of History

BEST PUBLIC ART
★ The Firebird
Runner-Up
Rail Trail Lights

BEST LOCAL PODCAST
★ *Be Powerful with Liz & Lee*
Runner-Up
All That to Say Podcast

BEST RADIO SHOW
★ *The Maney & LauRen Morning Show*
Runner-Up
The Bob and Sheri Show

BEST LOCAL SPORTS SHOW
★ *Charlotte Sports Live* (Queen City News)
Runner-Up
Mac & Bone (WFNZ)

BEST LOCAL TV NEWS TEAM
★ Queen City News
Runner-Up
WSOC

BEST NEWSLETTER
★ Axios Charlotte
Runner-Up
The Charlotte Ledger

BEST REPORTER
★ Shevaun Bryan
Runner-Up
Robin Kanady

BEST WEATHER FORECASTER
★ Brad Panovich
Runner-Up
Elissia Wilson

BEST ATHLETE
★ Bryce Young
Runner-Up
LaMelo Ball

BEST SPORTS TEAM
★ Charlotte FC
Runner-Up
Carolina Panthers

BEST SPORTING EVENT
★ Charlotte FC
Runner-Up
Jumpman Invitational

BEST SPORTS VENUE
★ Bank of America Stadium
Runner-Up
Truist Field

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PARTY PICS

Seen

Photographs by
DANIEL COSTON

2025 GREATER CHARLOTTE HEART BALL

Charlotte Convention Center
Crown Ballroom
2/1/2025

Hundreds attended the 67th annual ball, which raised more than $3 million for the American Heart Association's Charlotte chapter. The event celebrates the association's year-round Heart of Charlotte effort to improve community health through the relentless pursuit of public policy change, equitable health for all, and education and scientific discovery.

CLASS OF 2024
Dreamers
Dream Gala

2025 CAROLINAS DREAM GALA

Charlotte Convention Center
Crown Ballroom
1/25/25

The Charlotte nonprofit "makes sports dreams come true" for people aged 5-21 by customizing experiences with athletes, teams, and sporting events. The Dream Gala, now in its 13th year, is an annual fundraising event each January that celebrates the organization's Dream Kids from the previous year.

PALM ROYALE MAHJONG EVENING

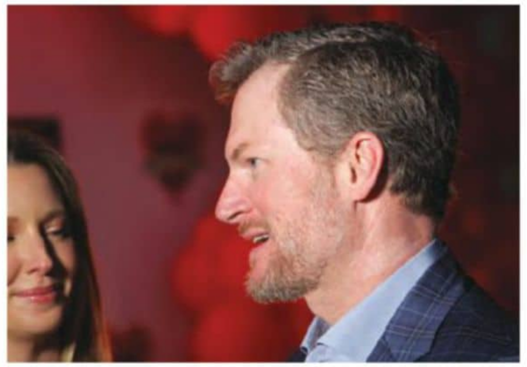
Junior League Of Charlotte
2/27/2025

The *Palm Royale*-themed event raised money for Mitchell's Fund, a nonprofit that provides counseling and play therapy services to children with terminal or life-threatening illnesses. Guests wore 1960s Palm Beach attire and enjoyed drinks and hors d'oeuvres as Jill Graham of Queen City Mahjong led the tile-based game.

BLUE SKIES BASH

The Barrel Room at Triple C Brewing
2/21/2025

Guests gathered for a night of music, fun, and fundraising in support of Camp Blue Skies, which provides enriching camp experiences for adults with developmental disabilities. The event featured live music from The Holdouts, a BINGO raffle, bites from Best Impression, and Triple C brews.



THE HEARTEST YARD UNGALA

Steak 48
2/24/2025

Fox Sports analyst and former Carolina Panther Greg Olsen hosted his annual charity event for The HEARTest Yard Foundation, his nonprofit for pediatric cardiovascular patients and their families in the Carolinas. Guests enjoyed dinner and cocktails at Steak 48 plus raffles and a silent auction, and the event raised $330,000.

AFRICAN AMERICAN HERITAGE FESTIVAL

Charlotte Museum of History
2/22/2025

The festival's theme, "Black Country," emphasized the Black experience in rural Mecklenburg County over time. The day of events at the Charlotte Museum of History included performances, guest speakers, panels, and community-focused events for the whole family. John Boyd, president of the National Black Farmers Association, was the event's keynote speaker.

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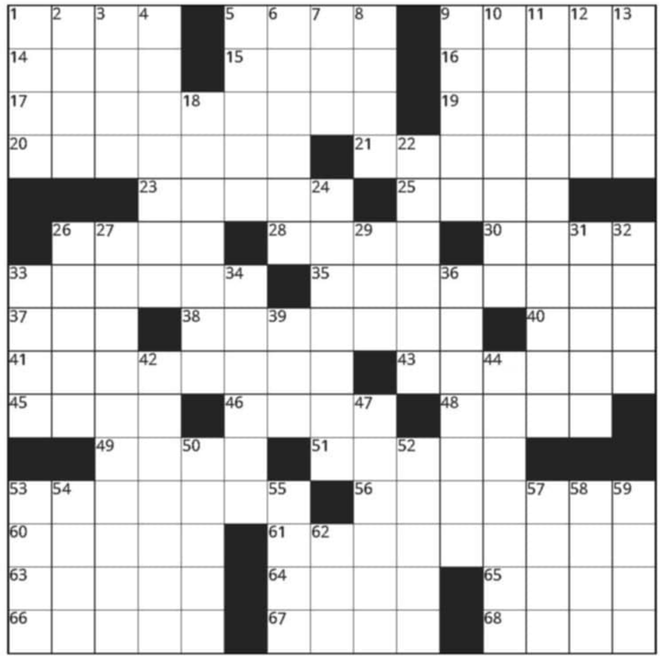
WACC AMBASSADORS CIRCLE SERIES: NICOLE BINTNER-BAKSHIAN

Hilton Charlotte Uptown
2/25/2025

The World Affairs Council of Charlotte hosted this luncheon featuring Nicole Bintner-Bakshian, the ambassador of Luxembourg to the United States, as part of its Ambassadors Circle Series lunch program. Bintner-Bakshian spoke about the enduring relationship between Luxembourg and the U.S.

COREGENTS

BY PHILLIP WHITE



ACROSS

1. Lovers' quarrel
5. East Charlotte road, park, and elementary
9. Austen's "Northanger ___"
14. Two threes, for one
15. Gulf of ___
16. ___ Arabia
17. Queen City, Pennsylvania
19. Media sales pro
20. Skincare serum
21. "Now We Are Six" author
23. Some Camaro roofs
25. "Veni, ___, vici"
26. Pointed figure
28. Bagel center
30. "South" and "Camp North," locally
33. Dance fad of the early 2010s
35. Upholsterer's requirements
37. Fingers
38. Advertise, or exchange a pawn for a queen in chess
40. Work leather
41. My darling in Montreal
43. Bolivar and Cowell
45. Jacob's twin
46. "Ah, me!"
48. Oaklore Distillery offerings
49. What may precede a Q and A?
51. Reese's or Oreo variety
53. Write in code?
56. Joined the cast of
60. Seventh-century pope
61. Queen City, Alaska
63. Mitigated
64. Bangladeshi currency
65. City north of Marseille
66. Jaded
67. Like weekly Catawba Nuclear Station sirens
68. Olden days

DOWN

1. Train at 9Round, say
2. Texas's ___ Duro Canyon
3. Plagues
4. Label at Daniel Stowe Botanical Garden
5. Pi, for one
6. Harpo Marx's original first name
7. Strengthen one's jawline
8. Tolstoy's Karenina
9. "Me, too"
10. "I wouldn't do that if I were you"
11. Queen City, Vermont
12. Tempting spot
13. "Gadzooks!"
18. Green
22. Prevents
24. Vegan chorizo, for example
26. Beverages at a Park Road "Shoppe"
27. Queen City, Alabama
29. Southeast Asian language
31. ___ list
32. IRS data
33. Coin that is more than 90% copper
34. List of corrections
36. Act with reluctance
39. Free sample at Olive This!
42. Pampers competitors
44. Penny-pinching
47. Crude dwellings
50. "Princess" or "Corpse" in movies
52. Bygone Apple messaging app
53. Commoner
54. Not imaginary
55. "South Park" co-creator Stone
57. Belafonte hit
58. Composer Stravinsky
59. Bogotá baby
62. Not, to a Scot

ANSWERS can be found online at charlottemagazine.com/crossword.

The Upside of Inconvenience

Why I quit Amazon Prime and
joined VisArt Video

BY JEN TOTA McGIVNEY

MY SEARCH FOR POSITIVITY during ominous times has grown desperate and almost comical. My latest theory: Knitting will help. Knitters seem so serene as they transform balls of yarn into works of art. When I heard about a knitting 101 class at VisArt Video in Eastway Crossing, I decided to knit something other than my brow. I, too, would become one of the serene yarn people.

I didn't, of course. Not quite, anyway. My first finished project landed somewhere between a coaster and a potholder and formed a shape unrecognized by geometry. Yet the three hours I spent knitting in that video store lifted my spirits. Within minutes, our group—six people whose ages spanned five decades—was laughing and talking easily together. The teacher asked if I wanted to join her group text for impromptu knitting hangouts. Heck, yeah, I did.

Just as fun was the scene around me. Watching people wander through VisArt—which has the biggest collection of DVD and VHS rentals on the East Coast—reminded me how fun renting movies used to be. The aisles of Blockbuster were where slumber parties kicked off and where my opinions of potential boyfriends rose or fell with their movie suggestions. It was where I could talk one particular boyfriend into yet another viewing of *Benny & Joon* or *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*. (Reader, I married him.)

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The endless scroll for streaming movies isn't the same. Countless times, I've searched titles and watched trailers until I grew too sleepy to watch a movie at all. The video store, however—there's a place that forces a decision and sometimes offers a surprise. Those aisles don't care about your past selections; no algorithm guides you to watch more of the same. In VisArt, the sections for the Criterion Collection, local directors, and erotica share an aisle. Who knows where your night is headed?

I canceled Amazon Prime that week. It was the final straw for a decision I'd long considered. Jeff Bezos might not go broke because of me, but, damn it, he became $140 less rich. The move was more for me, anyway. A return to fees and shipping delays may add just enough friction to compel me to shop locally or skip an unnecessary purchase.

I wonder how much we've made big things worse by making small things easier. Convenience is often measured by how many people we avoid: doorstep deliveries, self-checkouts, those weird robot servers. I'm all for saving time, but I see the anxiety many people associate with strangers and small talk. Then we wonder about the epidemic of loneliness. All our favorite people were once strangers, too.

These trivial conversations and interactions are important. Researchers have found that one of the biggest predictors of well-being is a wide range of people to interact with: close friends, family, acquaintances, and strangers. ("A relational diversity in one's social portfolio," they call it.) That last category is a biggie. People who interact with others, even strangers, throughout the day have more positive experiences than loners. The study, from the National Academy of Sciences, found that "the amount of social interaction in an individual's daily life is one of the most consistent predictors of psychological well-being." That "Good morning" to a neighbor or "How's your day?" to the Harris Teeter cashier goes a long way. Self-care can be other people.

When I left my VisArt knitting class, I accidentally forgot my needles at the store. The next morning, the gem of a teacher dropped them off in my mailbox, along with a message of, "Happy knitting!" Later that week, I got my first invitation to a group knitting hangout. Will I become an expert knitter? Perhaps. My second project was almost square! But did I meet a lovely person and join her merry band of knitters? Sure did.

I'll still shop online and stream movies occasionally. I hope, however, that making these things a little more inconvenient may encourage me to visit local stores more often, where I might bump into a familiar face or meet a new one. Or, quite possibly, where I might talk that one guy into yet another screening of *Benny & Joon*. ◼

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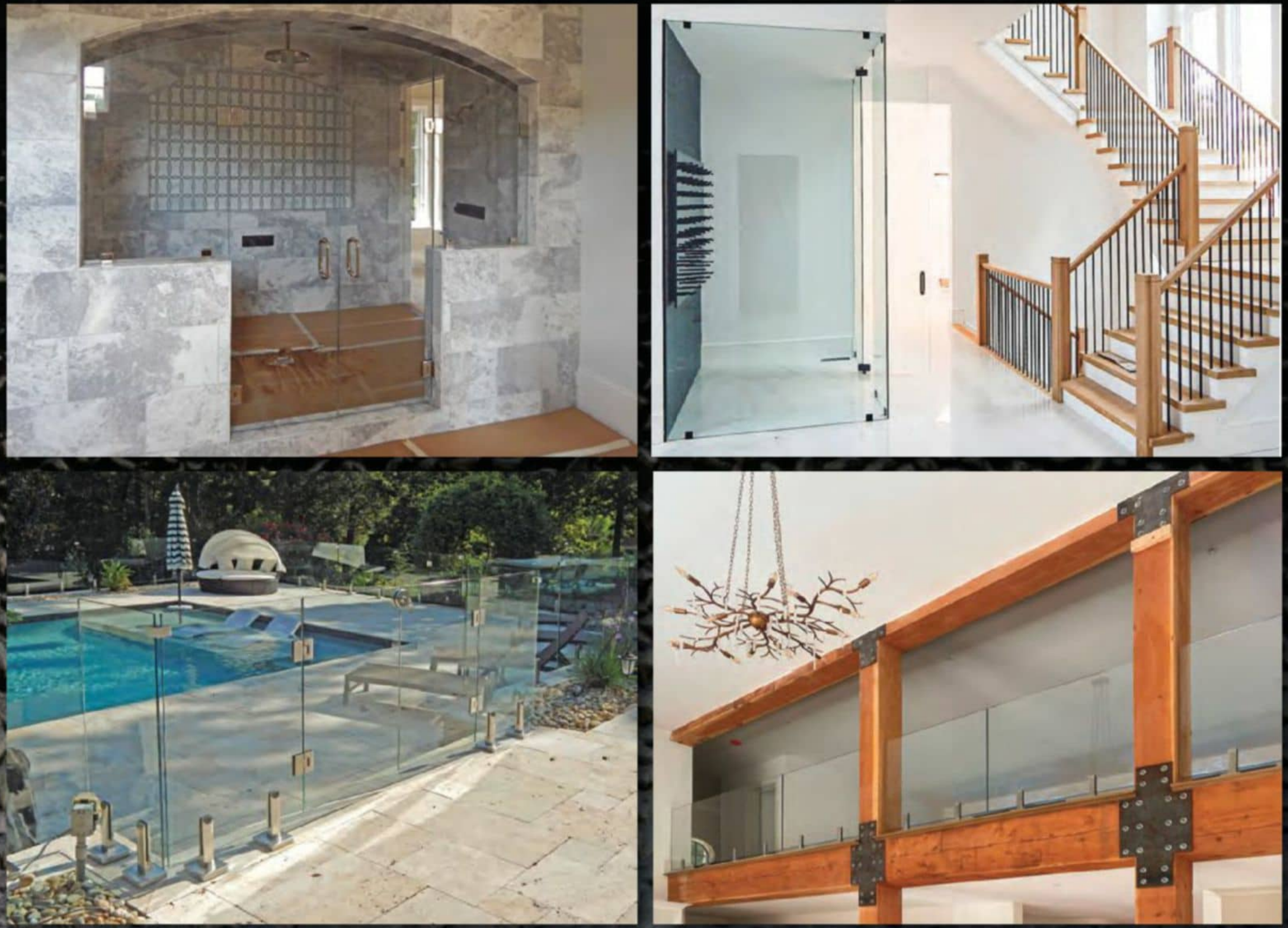

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